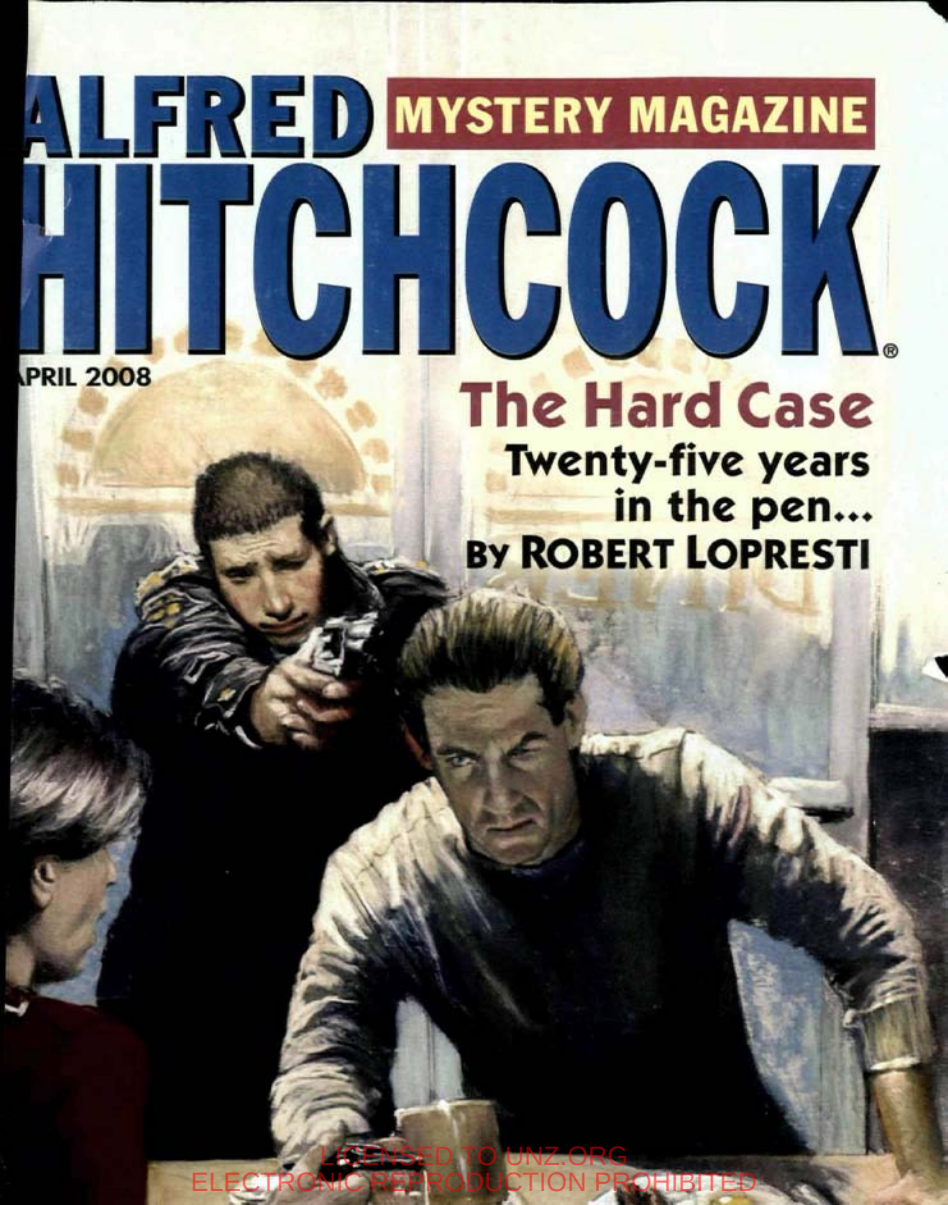
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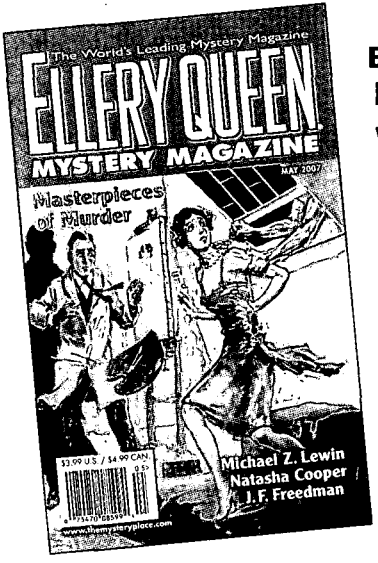
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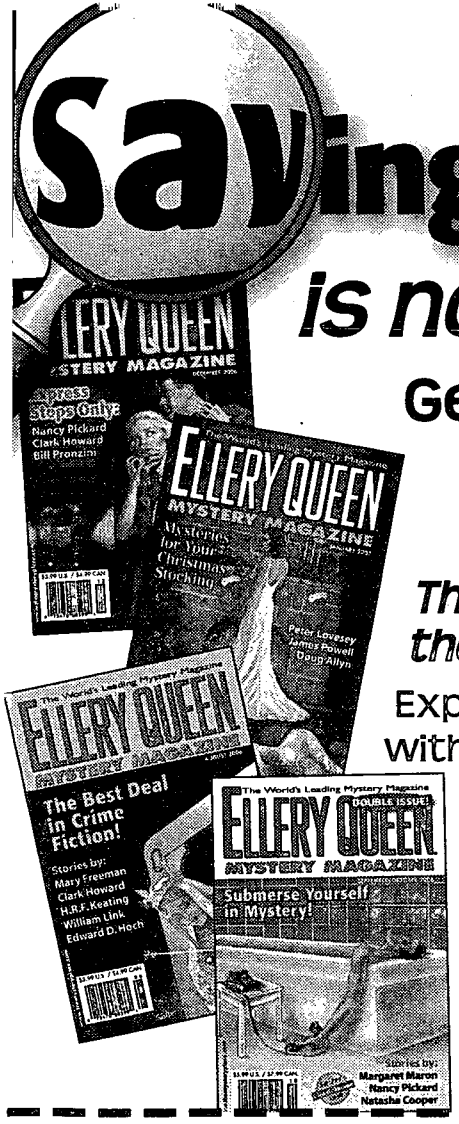
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

FIRST PLACE IN MYSTERY

We are thrilled to announce that we have a winner for the first annual Black Orchid Novella Award, or BONA. We worked with The Wolfe Pack to plan and introduce a writing contest that celebrates the classic detective genre and encourages an underappreciated literary form, the novella. Rex Stout, creator of the private eye Nero Wolfe, was a master at the form, and numerous Nero Wolfe novellas were published in sets of twos and threes. At AHMM, we read more than fifty blind submissions after they had been vetted by the Wolfe Pack members to make sure that there was nothing on the manuscripts that identified the authors. The best submissions displayed the author's awareness that the novella is more than just a long short story. There's much more room for complexity in the plot, and yet in many ways the novella must be as spare and economical as a short story. We were impressed by the overall quality of the submissions, but one stood out for us as having a well-developed detective who uses more mental muscle than brawn in his occupation, a strong mystery, and, most importantly, an engaging story. As it happens, both the detective and the author will be familiar to regular AHMM readers. Look for John Betancourt's winning story "Horse Pit" and his detective Peter "Pit" Geller in the 2008 July/August issue. Congratulations, John!

For more information about the contest and The Wolfe Pack, go to www.NeroWolfe.org.

We have three new authors to introduce to you this month. Leigh Lundin ("8 Across") made an impressive debut with his first published story in EQMM, "Swamped"—it won that magazine's Readers' Award last year. He is also a reglular blogger (along with issue mates Robert Lopresti and James Lincoln Warren) at www.CriminalBrief.com. Cathryn Grant makes her AHMM debut with a psyhcological suspense story, "Talking Herself to Death," which probes uncomfortable (to say the least) interpersonal dynamics at the office. Judy Roe ("Murder in the Barrens") is a former actress, and really a Jack of all trades in the theater. She drew on some of her professional experience when she wrote the novel *The Same Old Grind* (1975) about burlesque. Welcome all!

One final note: Our Reel Crime column is on hiatus this month, but will return in a future issue.

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COLD REASON

JAMES LINCOLN WARREN

Little old Stanley Stowicz is the only guy I know who buys the newspaper for the chess column. I don't mind chess. My brother Joe, the Ferrari family boy genius, taught me how to move the pieces when I was a kid back in New York, and explained things like castling and discovered check. That's as far as I got. Barroom billiards turned out to be a lot more my speed. To me, a Sicilian defense is the Fifth Amendment.

So when Stan starts babbling about gambits and fianchettos, this variation and that variation, my eyes have a tendency to glaze over—I only remember *fianchetto* because it's an Italian word.

"Carmine, don't you know that it's traditional for private eyes to play chess?" he once indignantly asked me. "Especially in L.A."

"First I've heard about it."

"Well, it is. Sharpens the mind, *nu?* Philip Marlowe was himself a chess player. Read the books."

"Philip Marlowe wasn't real," I said, "and I got enough to read without adding fiction to the list."

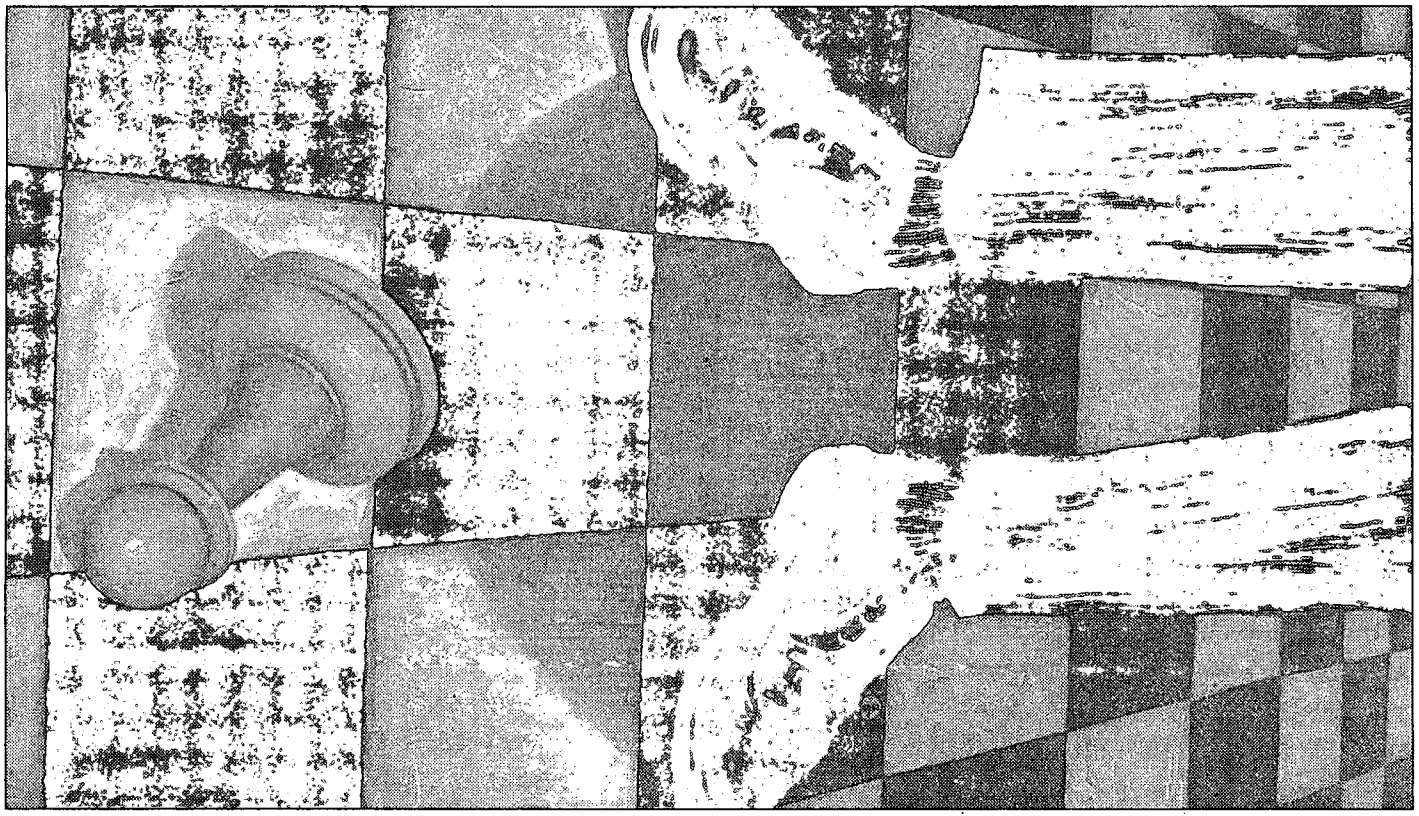
Stan just shook his head and mumbled, "My boss, the *proster kind.*"

Stowicz is an experienced investigator, which is why Custer Malone and I hired him at California Operatives, Inc., in the first place. I don't really know if his chess playing makes him a better detective or not. But it did once get us a client.

"Jesus wept. Red, our travel costs are out of control." Malone calls me Red because my first name is Carmine. My hair is actually black, but he likes the idea of claiming he's got a Red Ferrari at the office, yuk, yuk. As if we could afford it, or have the nuts to drive one even if we could afford it—a P.I. is supposed to blend into the pavement, not stick out like a drag queen at a Hell's Angels rally. Outrageously expensive sports cars are attention-getters, even in Beverly Hills. Of course, Malone says the same thing about my Armani suits, and I say the same thing about his six-hundred-dollar cowpie-kicker boots, but dress is an

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Edward Kinsella III



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altogether different thing from cars, especially in L.A.

It was early Thursday morning, January 5, 2006. Cus and I were in the office by ourselves, going over the firm's expenses from the previous year. He looked at the ledger, shaking his head. "We've got to show more discipline, or at least find a way to get more frequent flier miles."

"I'm just glad that football game was played in Pasadena last night," I said. "You would have flown to Timbuktu to see your Longhorns beat USC."

"It's not just long distance, Red. We need to tighten up vehicle use too. From now on, we're going to keep the car keys in here. When somebody needs a company car, they're going to have to check it out from one of us first. We'll start a mileage log."

"Don't you know that it's traditional for private eyes to play chess?"

Stan marched into Malone's office, looking like he'd just seen Moses part the Red Sea. "I played chess with Thor Brunker last night," he said, wide eyed.

We stared back at him.

"Now, that's just sad, Stan," drawled the Senator—I think of Cus Malone as "the Senator" when he struts out that paternalistic Texas twang—indulgently smiling and brushing back his mane of white hair. "First of all, that anybody would actually be named Thor. And secondly, heck, I know chess is easier for you to understand than college football, but there's really no excuse for missing Texas whup on them Trojans for the championship."

"I understand college football fine," Stowicz said. "It's just there's no point in watching football unless Brandeis is playing. And Thor and I have been playing chess over cigars and a good bottle of claret every Wednesday for twenty years."

"Brandeis has a football team?" I asked.

Stowicz snorted. "Of course not. I just said that's why I don't watch college football. Plus, I like costly wine better than cheap beer. Thor is quite the œnophile."

"No kidding. So, how many years will œnophilia get you, anyway?"

"Not a crime, Red—*œnophile* is just a way of saying, 'gourmet wino.' So Stan, if y'all have been playing together twenty years," Malone asked gently, "what was so special about last night?"

"It's the first time he's ever asked for help," Stowicz said triumphantly.

Malone sat and I stood there waiting. Then the penny dropped.

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I asked, "You mean that Thor realized you're a better player than he is and asked for advice on a move?"

Stan frowned. "That, he already knew. And that stubborn old bastard wouldn't take advice from a doctor if he spat out his spleen."

Wrong penny.

"Thor's an attorney, and he's got a situation. He wants our help."

"He wants to hire us?" Malone raised his eyebrows.

"Wait until you hear. He has a client named Friedrich Lieber. I know neither of you *zhlubs* have ever heard of him, but he's a pretty well-known retired chess grand master, originally from Bavaria, who now lives here in Beverly Hills. Anyway, if you can believe it, Lieber somehow found and got his *lapes* on the Morphy watch."

"Whaddaya know. Amazing. Uh—what the hell is a Morphy watch, exactly?" I inquired.

"Stan actually said *the* Morphy watch, Red," Malone pointed out. "So what we really want to know, Stan, is—what the hell is *the* Morphy watch, exactly?"

"The Morphy watch. *Paul* Morphy's watch."

We stared blankly at Stowicz.

"You mean you guys never heard of Paul Morphy?"

"I think that's safe to assume," said Malone. Of course Stowicz knew we'd never heard of Paul Morphy, but he was enjoying himself too much.

Stan started, stopped, paused to get his composure, and said in his most I-know-you're-an-idiot-but-I'm-still-trying-to-be-nice voice, "Paul Morphy was only the greatest chess player of all time. He was a nineteenth-century New Orleans lawyer. Now pay attention.

"In 1858, Morphy toured Europe and crushed every opponent who faced him. In those days, they didn't have world champions, but if they had, everybody agrees it would have been Morphy by a landslide. Anyhow, in 1859, when he returned to America, the Brooklyn Chess Club presented him with an engraved gold watch they had manufactured specifically for him. It became instantly famous. The company that made it even used a Morphy testimonial to advertise the accuracy of their product."

"I'm guessing *that's* the Morphy watch," I said.

"Shut up and listen. Like a lot of great grand masters, Morphy was one *meshuggeneh* sobanavitch. Persecution complex. He was convinced his brother-in-law was out to get him, so he struck back with a lawsuit—an expensive lawsuit. To cover the costs, Morphy pawned the watch to a friend of his, Jules Arnous de Rivière, a famous French master. The watch remained in Arnous de Rivière's

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family until they offered it for sale in 1921. The price then was six thousand francs, or about five thousand dollars. But then it disappeared, and no one knows how or why."

"I reckon it's worth a pretty piece of change by now," Malone observed, "the antiques market being what it is. Maybe even more than double what it was then."

"Ten thousand dollars maybe will get you a quartz Timex and a cup of drip coffee. No, gentlemen, to a serious collector, that watch is friggin' priceless. But the story doesn't end there. You see, in the sixties, the dial was discovered and acquired by the San Francisco Academy of Sciences. It was very easy to identify because it was engraved with Morphy's name, and instead of numbers it has little chess pieces. Unique. But nobody ever knew what happened to the rest of the watch. Not until Lieber, that is."

"That's a very interesting story, Stan," said Malone. "How do you know all of this?"

"Am I a detective or what?"

"And where do we fit in?" I asked.

"An old battle-axe named Madeleine Saulnier is suing Lieber for possession of the watch. Claims it was stolen from the Arnous de Rivière family and belongs to her by right of inheritance. Thor wants us to trace its provenance and prove the watch is legally Lieber's."

"That's a little outside our line," Malone said. "Red, what do you think?"

"The customer is always right, Cus," I replied. "If Counselor Brunker is willing to pay the going rate, I say we put Moon on it."

"All right, then."

One thing about Cal Ops is that we all have different ethnicities. This is important for a detective agency in Los Angeles because the city itself is widely and wildly diverse, and we need operatives that will fit in anywhere if we're going to be able to do our job.

Likewise our backgrounds. I'm former NYPD and Italian Catholic. The Senator was once a Texas Ranger and is Orange Irish-Texican, but we put up with him anyway. Stowicz grew up in Brooklyn and worked as a Pinkerton man until Securitas bought them out, whereas John Jett, who is black, was in the L.A. Sheriff's Department for twenty-one years, most of them as a detective. The only one of our operatives we raised from apprentice ourselves is Jessica Zavala.

Nora Moon came to us from the investigative branch of Jewelers Mutual. Nora is of Korean extraction, in her mid thirties,

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of average height, with an athletic figure and a face reminiscent of her surname, fair and round and radiant. Obviously her normal beat is the Asian community, but given her experience in the jewelry trade, she was the clear choice to look into the Lieber matter.

"He seems like a sweet old coot, but his place is a little creepy," she said as she returned the company car keys in conformance to Malone's new accountability rule.

"Tell me about it."

So she did.

I'm sure you've heard of certain rich rap stars doing what they can to maintain their "street cred" by demonstrating their insider knowledge of gang signs, drugs, firearms, and bling-bling. In Beverly Hills, the parallel cultural phenom is *drive* cred, insider knowledge of designer labels, plastic surgery, where to park, and bling-bling. The common denominator is the ostentatious display of wealth.

Believe it or not, in the flats of southern BH on either side of Olympic Boulevard, there are a bunch of old apartment houses for those unfortunate few in the city who can't actually crap cash, the so-called "slums" of Beverly Hills. Maybe, but a walk-up studio apartment on the second floor of a building built in the forties—anything higher than two storeys isn't really typical south of Wilshire—will still put you out over a grand a month. Friedrich Lieber lived in such a place on Elm Drive, between Beverwil Drive and Doheny Drive, not at all far from south Rodeo Drive and Cal Ops's office on Pico Boulevard.

Of course, street parking is by permit only, so Moon had a little trouble finding a spot. Then she had to hoof it for three blocks. She walked up the stairs and knocked on the door.

"It's open," a deep voice, rich but breathlessly weak, called from the other side. It had the barest hint of a German accent. "Come in."

"He keeps it dark, shades drawn, and he's got chess boards and clocks all over the place—most of the clocks have two faces," Nora told us.

"Those would be chess clocks," Stowicz offered, "used to time your moves."

There was also a grandfather clock the size of a sarcophagus, the fanciest Swiss cuckoo clock Moon had ever set eyes on, a big old mahogany mantel clock, a marine chronometer, an elegant silver and gold skeleton clock in a glass dome, an ancient brass windup alarm clock with bells on top—there were timepieces everywhere. There was even a clock on Lieber's coffee maker. The whole room pulsed with ticking.

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"To make room for everything, he sleeps on a futon, the traditional kind you fold away during the day. And no chairs, not even at the breakfast bar in the kitchenette. When I got there, he was sitting in a padmasana *on the floor, drinking a glass of dago red and admiring the watch."*

"What's a padmasana?" Stowicz queried.

"Lotus position. Yoga."

"Never mind that. Did he tell you how he got the Morphy watch?" I asked.

"Yes. After I found a place to sit."

"Don't you Koreans all sit on floor cushions?" asked Stowicz.

"I was born in Hollywood, Stan," she replied tartly.

"Forgive me if I don't get up, my dear," Lieber said. He coughed violently, his face going from wan to scarlet in seconds and then pale again as he quieted down. "Please excuse me. Asthma is hard on an old man. It's hard for me just to stand these days. I'm trying to get into the empty apartment downstairs, but in the meantime, the stairs do take the mickey out of me."

"I'm surprised you can get your feet over your knees," Moon said. "It hurts my thighs just looking at you."

"The yoga helps me breathe. Sit here beside me," he said, patting the cushion.

"No thank you, sir. Not in a skirt."

"Of course not, how stupid of me. Why don't you remove Capablanca from that short little table next to the ionizer there and sit down on it? It's sturdy. You can use one of my floor cushions to make it more comfortable."

"I thought Capablanca was an old movie with Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman," I said.

"Capablanca was one of the greats," pronounced Stowicz. "Lieber was talking about a chess board displaying one of his games."

"That's right," Nora confirmed. "Anyway, I carefully set the board on the floor and parked my butt on the table, crossing my legs, I mean, I didn't want to give the old boy any kind of thrill, not in his condition. The way he was wheezing, a thrill could be fatal."

"Saucy wench," I said.

"Macho pig," she replied, pausing a beat before adding, "sir. Anyway, he offered me a glass of burgundy and I turned it down."

For whatever reason, Brunker hadn't told Lieber to expect someone from Cal Ops, but after introducing herself and explaining why we'd been hired, Moon explained what she intended to do, to Lieber's evident approval. "There are essentially two ways to get Mr. Brunker the material he needs to prevail in the lawsuit. The first way is to show that the provenance of the watch is clean

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and that you are indeed the lawful owner."

"I *am* the lawful owner," Lieber said, his long face stern as steel. "This watch came to me for a reason."

"Uh, okay. Then all we have to do is prove it. But if that turns out to be not so simple, we go to plan B—try to show that Mrs. Saulnier's claim to the watch is suspect, and she has no more right to it than you do."

"I want you to do both."

"Mr. Lieber, it's important for you to realize that we're actually working for Mr. Brunker and that we receive our instructions only from him. It's for your benefit, really. This way, the confidentiality between you and your attorney is intact. If you instruct us directly, that privilege doesn't apply because we're not lawyers."

"I see. I'll talk to Thor, then."

"That would be best. In the meantime, can I have a look at the documentation you got with the watch?"

"The receipt's in the drawer to the left of the kitchen sink. I keep all my receipts there."

"Only a receipt? Weren't there any other papers that came with it? You know, that might list who owned it over the last eighty years?" Moon asked as she stood and walked into the kitchenette.

"No. Is that bad? Everybody knows the watch disappeared—that's a matter of history. Nobody ever said it was stolen, not until Mrs. Saulnier. She's just greedy."

"Well, it doesn't help. But maybe I can find out more from the guy who sold it to you. Do you mind if I get the receipt out?"

"Help yourself."

The drawer was stuffed so full with paper it was hard to open. There were invoices, receipts, shopping coupons, operating manuals for the kitchen appliances, and a couple of brochures for log cabins in Idyllwild, all crammed into a near solid mass. Moon had to shuffle a lot of it around before she found the receipt she was looking for demurely tucked under a couple of recent bills. She pulled it out. She reached into her purse and retrieved her portable scanner. This is a device eight and a half inches long and about as big around as a thick felt-tip highlighter—a great gadget no private detective should be without, not if you regularly examine records, something we do a lot. She laid the receipt flat against the kitchenette counter and scanned it into the device's memory. Five seconds later, Nora Moon squeezed the original back into the drawer.

"What, you didn't read the receipt first?"

Moon gave Stowicz a look that would have stunned a charging

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rhino. "No, Stanley, I wadded it into a ball and swallowed it. Of course I read it. The watch was sold to Lieber by a man named John R. Ferguson, a private collector listing a Carmel address and phone number, for twelve hundred dollars in cash."

"Only twelve hundred bucks? Unbelievable. If that's the case, Ferguson was robbed," said Stowicz.

"Or he knew the watch was stolen and took what he could get," Moon said. "Lieber says they were put in touch by a San Francisco antiques dealer named Hamilton Hogue."

"And now you want us to cough up for a trip up to Carmel-by-the-Sea, I'll bet," I said.

She smiled. I hate it when she smiles. It does the same thing to me as when other women cry. "But you'll just charge it to Brunker as an expense, won't you? Please?"

"Oh, all right," I said, feeling every inch the complete sucker.

"Why does she get to go to Carmel?" Stowicz said, imperious as an offended meter maid. "I'm the one who got us the case. Why can't I go to Carmel?"

"Because—because you're flying up to San Francisco to check out this Hogue character."

So much for our travel budget. Cus might not look too kindly on my decision, but I had a strong feeling it was the only thing to do.

"I can live with that." Stowicz grinned, smug as a slug in a flower bed. To Stan, San Francisco is nothing short of Shangri-La.

Doing a few discreet inquiries for a friend is one thing, launching a full-scale investigation is something else. Nora Moon had been right in assuming I intended to pass the travel expenses off on Brunker, and I was right that Malone wouldn't be too happy about it. The next day, we had words.

"Forget about sending those two off to the gelid north," he said, "until we secure Thor Brunker's permission. He's the one footing the bill."

"He's a lawyer. He'll just charge Lieber in turn," I pointed out. "Stowicz says the watch is worth at least six figures."

"Lieber lives in a studio apartment."

"In Beverly Hills."

"Not so fast, son." The aspect of Malone's personality I think of as the Senator had emerged. "First, have you checked to see if the Carmel address is genuine? What if it's just some mailbox joint?"

"The street and number are real. If it is just a dropoff, we won't find out who's using it by sitting on our hands in Beverly Hills," I retorted.

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"And why not combine the trips? Moon can go to San Francisco after she's finished in Carmel."

"But who knows where the trail will lead Moon after Carmel?" I asked. "It could be days before she can get to San Francisco and Hogue, and if there is anything illegal going on, that's enough time to have Hogue put up his guard and vanish. Come on, Cus, you know as well as I do that these inquiries have to be independent of each other."

"We don't churn accounts," he said, pursing his lips.

"Madonne!" Now I was starting to lose my temper too. "This isn't about churning accounts, Malone. It's about due diligence. We took the job—"

The phone rang on Malone's desk and he slapped the speaker button. He knew it would shut me up. Neither one of us would let a client overhear us having what he liked to call a "wrangle." That just pissed me off more, but I clamped my mouth shut anyway.

"Custer Malone," he said automatically.

A tinny voice came out of the speaker. "Boss, it's Nora."

"You better not be calling from Big Sur," he growled.

"Hardly. I'm at Lieber's place on Elm Drive."

"What for?"

"I had to come back to get the receipt so I could copy it. My damn pocket scanner screwed up, and I couldn't download the image to my computer back at the office."

"All right, so what's the matter?"

"So the matter is that there's no answer when I knock. That wouldn't bother me, except there's this weird odor at the door. It reminds me of—it smells like a swimming pool."

"Nora, this is Ferrari," I said. "Is the door locked?"

"I haven't tried it. Let me check." After a pause, she came back on. "It's open. Oh God."

There was another pause. This one seemed a little too long.

"Talk to me, Nora," Malone said. "What is it?"

"Lieber. He's dead."

By the time we arrived, Detective Sergeant Harry Flanders of the BHPD Crimes Against Persons Unit was there with three detectives and twice that many uniforms. We wouldn't have gotten past the police line except that it was Malone who had called it in, and Flanders naturally wanted to know if we could give him any leads.

Moon stood in the upstairs hallway, clutching her elbows and looking miserable.

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"Both the watch and the receipt are gone," she said. "I already told Harry."

"Hi, Cus. Carmine." Flanders nodded briefly to each of us. Our relationship with local law enforcement is generally good, largely because half our ops—Malone, Jett, and me—are former peace officers, and we know how to stay out of the way.

Flanders reminds me of one of those retired professional quarterbacks who do network football commentary: handsome, trim, and tan, with thinning blond hair and piercing light blue eyes, his every move transmitting enough confidence to suit a televangelist. When he turns it on, you can feel the charm pour over you like summer sunshine. You have a tendency to trust him, to relax and start babbling about whatever pops into your head like some teenage mall rat on a cell phone. It's a great quality for a cop to have, and he's a good cop.

I don't like him.

Not that he wasted any of that wattage on us. He saved that for Nora. After we gave him an account of our involvement with the deceased, it was only out of professional courtesy that he let us look over the scene with him. The scent of chlorine was still very strong, but there was something else too. The smell of strong red wine.

Lieber's supine body was stretched out on the futon Moon had told us about, right in the middle of the room. He'd been a tall man in life, and his feet, clad in soft gray woolen socks, stuck out beyond the end of the pad and the coverlet. He wore silvery gray satin pajamas with a chess knight embroidered in gold on the left breast. His head was tilted back on the Japanese pillow (Moon called it a *makura)*, his disheveled, longish white hair, streaked with faded red, spread out against it, his prominent deep-set eyes closed, his broad mouth wide open. He didn't look at all peaceful to me, but then, I don't think dead men ever do. It did not look like he had suffered much at the end, though.

"Must have come while he was asleep," I said. "Looks natural enough. But that smell—homicide?"

"Not sure. We're still waiting for the M.E. to show up," Flanders said, "but it looks like it to me."

Malone wasn't looking at the corpse. He was squatting over by the ionizer Moon had mentioned in her report. It was one of those tall air-filter gizmos you see advertised on daytime TV to silently rid rooms of cigar smoke, fish, and pet odors.

He stood and walked into the kitchenette.

"Somebody wanted to make it easy for us," said Flanders. "Leaving the door unlocked, I mean, so there wouldn't have to be a forced entry."

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"Nora said it was unlocked the first time she was here," I said. "He probably didn't feel the need to lock it, not with Beverly Hills's finest around to keep him safe."

"Yeah, well, his apartment keys are missing."

"Did you find the bottle yet?" Malone asked.

Flanders looked annoyed. "What bottle?"

"Or maybe a box, if Lieber liked it cheap," Malone said. "Anyway, the container the wine came in. Smells like a lot was spilled. Is there a stain anywhere?"

"Only in the grout between the tiles on the kitchen counter," said Flanders. "The rest must have been cleaned up. Maybe that's where the disinfectant odor comes from. There's a half-empty bottle of laundry bleach under the sink."

Malone grunted. "That's not the bottle I'm interested in."

"Well, we haven't found a wine bottle."

Malone nodded and walked over to where the coffee maker sat on the counter. The cone of a gold foil filter lay next to it. He sniffed at the machine and backed away, like an alley cat investigating something in the garbage to see if it's food only to find out that it isn't.

"Harry, you're a cop," he said unnecessarily to Flanders. "I'll bet you don't move until you've had your daily dose of caffeine in the morning."

"Never touch the stuff," Flanders said.

"Don't tell me. Carrot banana smoothies with a protein powder shot," I muttered, but nobody heard me.

"If you did, I bet you'd use a timer on your coffee maker, though," Malone said, unconcerned, "so it would be ready by the time you crawled out from under your down comforter at five A.M."

"Wouldn't bother with it. I go to the gym for a morning workout. That's how *I* wake up."

"Now, me, I like a cup of joe first thing, just to open up my eyes. But this pot was brewed to make sure Lieber didn't ever wake up, Harry. What we have here is an improvised twin agent gas grenade. A very elegant improvised twin agent gas grenade. Ain't no bout a doubt it. Mr. Lieber here was murdered."

"What are you talking about?" Flanders asked.

"The air filter do-jobber is unplugged. Why else do you think it stinks so much in here?" Malone said. "That's a little strange, don't you think? Lieber had asthma, according to Ms. Moon. You can bet he didn't unplug it. That means somebody else did, because they didn't want the air to be filtered. Now look at this coffee maker."

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It was one of those slick European models, all black and chrome with a large red LED display, quite out of place with the rest of Lieber's eccentric but essentially antique décor.

"It was programmed to start brewing at three o'clock this morning—now come on, nobody brews coffee at three o'clock in the morning, not unless they're going fishing, and I don't see a rod anywhere—and the maker didn't have any coffee in it anyway. The filter was taken out."

"Go on."

"Half the coffee pot was filled with an ammonia cleanser, and half the reservoir with laundry bleach. At three, when Lieber's all snug on the rug, the bleach goes through the coffee maker into the pot, and bingo."

"It produced chlorine gas," I said, shaking my head. "Awfully elaborate."

"You mean carefully planned," Malone said. "It takes a lot of chlorine to kill, and chlorine is heavier than air. The murderer knew Lieber had asthma and slept on the floor."

"What about the spilled wine?" Flanders asked out loud, but then answered his own question. "Oh, right. The suspect got Lieber stinking drunk so he wouldn't wake up when the coffee maker started."

"Why, looky here," said Malone, standing over the garbage basket. "Wet paper towels, drenched in red wine."

"I'll get a criminalist to bag that," Flanders said. It was obvious that his professional courtesy was running out, and after all, he had a job to do and we were in the way.

"One last thing, Harry, *compadre*, and then we're out of it," Malone said as we stepped into the hall. "Concerning those paper towels. I know you guys got a slick and sophisticated laboratory, but if I were you, I'd leave some evidence for the lab at U.C. Davis."

"Universities don't run crime labs," Flanders replied.

"Not the crime lab, son. I'm talking the *wine* lab."

"Speaking of labs." Flanders turned to where Moon waited for us. "Nora, I think I'd better have your scanner. We might be able to download the image of the receipt. Our computer guys are pretty good."

"I left it at Cal Ops for our own IT guy to look at," she said. Flanders looked surprised, and then Moon snapped, "Hey, the damn thing didn't work, so I ditched it. I came back here to borrow the receipt so I could Xerox it back in the office."

"Right. Well, I still want to look at it."

"Sure. Guess I'll go and get it, then." Mouth tight and brow fur-

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rowed, she turned on her heels and swept gracefully down the stairs. Looking sort of bemused, Flanders watched her a little bit longer than he really needed to.

Thor Brunker was waiting for us in the conference room when we got back. If he wasn't about to give birth, he did a pretty good imitation.

If you're thinking that Thor Brunker looked like little Stanley Stowicz, you couldn't be more wrong. Brunker was as big as a bouncer at a Hollywood lap dance lounge. His father had been an Olympic weightlifter and his mother a cover girl back when statuesque Valkyries had been in fashion. He wore an expensive salt-and-pepper toupee and a custom-tailored suit that wouldn't have looked out of place on Cary Grant, if Cary Grant had been a cape buffalo—the coat cuffs even had buttonholes.

My first thought was, I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of a less-than-affectionate bear hug from this guy. My second thought was, How in the name of the ever-lovin' law could somebody as modestly funded as Lieber afford somebody as obviously expensive as Brunker?

Not that I had time to consider it. Brunker's right index finger jabbed at Malone like a schoolyard bully. "I'd like an explanation. Right now. If I'd known you idiots would get my client killed—"

The Senator didn't seem intimidated at all. He just slid over to the wet bar and poured two fingers of Johnny Walker into a crystal rocks glass and deftly passed it off to the offending hand.

"Let's not jump to conclusions, Counselor," Malone said quietly. "I give you my word that we did not violate confidentiality in this matter. Ms. Moon is an experienced prof—"

"That dumb slant? Exactly whose boneheaded idea was it to send her to Lieber, anyway? If I wanted a mail-order bride, I coulda got some Russian bimbo for a lot less."

I took a deep breath before speaking. "You have exactly ten seconds to apologize, Mr. Brunker, before I stuff you into that little wastepaper basket there."

"Not ten. Five," said Malone, his eyes narrowing.

"Look, I thought I was hiring *Stanley*—"

"Four."

"Right! All right! I'm sorry, okay? I'm just a little upset."

"You just missed seeing Carmine Ferrari get very upset," Malone said. "And you know, some folks don't even survive seeing Carmine get upset. But that's over now. We're all friends here." Malone can be as smooth as Irish malt when he lies. "But let me tell you, sir, there wasn't anything wrong or improper about the

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way Moon was handling things. She's a professional, Counselor. Whoever killed Lieber didn't do so because of anything Moon did."

"Well, why was she talking to my client in the first place?" Brunker asked, still visibly agitated. "I'm the one who hired you. You should have been talking to me. Look. All I wanted was Stanley Stowicz to come to my office so I could give him a copy of the receipt and everything else he needed to trace the provenance of the damn watch. That's all. This—young woman, she butts in and puts ideas in Lieber's head about investigating not only the provenance of the watch, but Mrs. Saulnier's claim as well, and God knows what else. That's not what I hired you for, damn it."

"Hold on, Mr. Brunker," I said. "How could we be expected to ignore the Saulnier claim if our job was to establish the bona fides of Mr. Lieber's ownership? As to the reason for putting Moon on the case instead of Stowicz, well, tracing jewelry is much more her specialty than it is Stanley's. We assumed you wanted our best work."

"This is all moot," said Malone. "The homicide makes it a police matter. We can't interfere with police investigations, Mr. Brunker, on account of they'd get a mite hostile if we tried. Sorry, but we're off the case."

"Yes, you are," Brunker said, frowning.

"Then I guess there's not a lot more to be said."

Nora Moon chose that moment to enter the conference room. "I need the keys to the Camry," she said. "I've got to drop off the pen scanner with Lieber's receipt on it at the police station."

"Tell you what," said Brunker. "I'll give you a ride in my Vanden Plas. I'm headed over there myself." He actually blushed. "Your bosses will tell you I—I said something I shouldn't have, and that I owe you an apology, Ms. Moon. I might as well make it good."

"That's very kind of you," Moon said, a little surprised.

"You can take the Camry, Nora," said Malone.

"And miss the chance for a ride in a Jag? I don't think so."

"Gentlemen," Brunker said, nodding briskly. He held the door open for Nora. "After you, miss."

After they were gone, I avoided Malone's glance as we went back to work. I was still ticked off at him for accusing me of churning the file.

Moon hadn't made it back to the office by one P.M. I knew Flanders was sweet on her, so I assumed he'd taken her to lunch at some chic bistro that serves minuscule portions of tasteless garbage on beds of Belgian endive and raspberry syrup. When she

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wasn't back by two, I called her cell. When that rolled over to voice mail, I hung up and dialed BHPD to find out when we could have our employee back.

"Detective Sergeant Flanders."

"Hello, Harry. This is Carmine Ferrari—"

"Hey. So, when are you sending Nora over with the scanner?"

"What do you mean? She should have dropped it off hours ago. Haven't you seen her?"

"Hold on." He was back within a few seconds. "Sorry, Carmine, she hasn't come in yet."

The BHPD HQ is just off Santa Monica Boulevard, right behind City Hall. It's less than ten blocks from Cal Ops.

I calmly said, "She left here with Thor Brunker on their way over there just before ten this morning. Something's wrong."

"Uh, she was with Brunker, you say?"

There was a tightness to his voice I didn't like.

"What are you not telling me, Harry?"

"Now don't blow a gasket."

"I'm perfectly cool." You little *faccia di merda.*

"Well," he said, pausing to clear his throat, "the truth is we've got a warrant out on Brunker."

"Tell me it's not for Lieber's murder," I said. My lips and fingers suddenly felt numb.

"No, not that. It's for the unauthorized practice of law, actually," he said. "Turns out the State Bar suspended him some months ago for fudging his accounts and ripping off his clients. He's deeply in debt, Carmine, to the tune of a few hundred thou. Truth is, we do kinda like him for the Lieber case—only there's no evidence."

"Yes there is. The receipt," I said dully. "It must tie him in somehow. Harry, he's kidnapped her to keep you from seeing that damn receipt."

"There still might be an innocent explanation—I think he's smarter than to kidnap her, I mean, that's a federal rap. If he was involved with Lieber's death, the last thing he'd want is the FBI on his tail."

"My ass. He's desperate." My mind raced. "Wait a minute. Let me think. They left in his car. He drives a fancy Jaguar. It's got to have an antitheft locator on it. You can't get a car like that without one."

"Good thinking. I'll get right on it."

I went straight to Malone's office to give him the bad news. I wasn't angry at him anymore.

Turned out he was mad at himself enough for both of us. "I should have insisted she take the Toyota. But I thought she could

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take care of herself, and I didn't think he'd do anything that stupid. Not in a vehicle so easy to trace."

"You mean you already suspected him, Cus?"

"Damn straight. Why do you think I suggested getting the wine analyzed? Nora told us Lieber drank the kind of plonk that comes in jugs. Stanley says that Brunker drinks only expensive vintages. What could be easier than getting Lieber drunk on wine he couldn't normally afford?"

"Then why didn't you say something?"

"Red, he was our client. Anyway, it was only a hunch."

But we didn't have time for any more recriminations. BHPD found the Vanden Plas within the hour. It was parked in a driveway off North Hillcrest Road, looking properly in place right in front of Brunker's multimillion-dollar house. There was nobody in the car and no one at home.

It was starting to look like we might never see Nora again. Not alive, anyway.

Malone keeps a soft-tip electronic dartboard mounted on the inside of his office door. He says he picked up the vice in a fishermen's bar several years ago in Ketchikan, Alaska, back when he was still a Texas Ranger and up there on a case. These days he uses it mainly when he's thinking. Brenda, his wife, won't allow the thing in the house, so we're the ones who have to put up with its infernal belching and bleeping whenever he gets the urge.

It's when the bleeping stops that you better listen.

He flew into my office. "Get your piece, son. We ride."

I took my Beretta Cougar 8040 F out of the desk drawer and clipped it to my belt. I saw that he already had his Gold Cup riding in a tooled holster at his side. On the way down to the parking lot he began to talk.

"Keys, Red. The keys were missing."

We reached Malone's shiny black Ford F-350, his "Texas Cadillac," and I climbed in the passenger side just in time to close the door before he backed out. He continued to talk as he pulled out of the lot and headed for Robertson Boulevard.

"How did Friedrich Lieber get around town?" he asked. "With asthma as bad as his, you can bet he didn't walk everywhere. And I don't really see him taking the bus."

"You mean he must have had a car. Well, of course he had a car. We live in L.A."

"A blue '76 BMW 1502, to be exact. According to his landlord, Lieber treated that car as if it were a thoroughbred stallion. That

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model was only ever sold in Europe, and Lieber brought it over thirty years ago. He considered it a classic. Well, guess what ain't in the carport anymore."

"So the murderer—Brunker, that is—must have stolen the Beemer."

"Stands to reason. He needs money. I'll bet he was figuring to sell it."

"All right, so he switches the Jag for the Beemer, kidnaps Nora, and makes his escape. But where did he go?"

"You keep your car keys on the same ring as your apartment keys, don't you, Red?"

"Actually, I don't," I replied, "but most people do."

"Made me wonder what other keys might be on Lieber's ring."

"Apartment, mailbox, car. Office, if he had one, which he didn't. What else?"

"How about a vacation home? Think, son. What did Nora Moon find in Lieber's receipt drawer?"

Suddenly I got it. "The brochure. Idyllwild."

"Yep. Idyllwild."

To any native New Yorker of a certain age, Idlewild—note the spelling, please—is JFK International Airport. It was renamed in 1963 right after the president was shot, before my time, of course, but not before my pop's. When I first moved out to California and heard about the resort village of Idyllwild, pronounced the same way as the airport, up yonder in the San Jacinto Mountains southwest of Palm Springs, I was amused.

But not the first time I went to visit.

Italian families have deep roots. My father's side of the family comes from the north, and I have relations in the Piedmont. I was and still am a city boy when all's said and done, but I remember visiting my cousins Pietro and Rafael in the rugged white-capped mountains when I was a kid, and it felt a lot like home.

That's Idyllwild, an Alpine paradise surrounded on all sides by scorching desert and without the ski bunnies, punk snowboarders, and milling crowds you find at Big Bear and Mammoth. It really shouldn't be there at all.

Just the spot for a homesick Bavarian.

This time of the year, getting there wouldn't be easy. The light was failing before we got to our turnoff at Banning, where we had to stop to put chains on the truck's tires: Once it climbed out of the Coachella Valley, California 243 was certain to be covered with snow. I was worried that we weren't dressed for the cold,

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especially at night, and about what we were going to do, exactly, once we got up to Idyllwild. Neither one of us wanted to admit that this quest was on the wishful thinking side of a long shot.

By the time we reached the first summit, fat snowflakes had started to flutter down from the black canopy above, quiet, frozen, and lethal. The only permanent law enforcement presence in Idyllwild is the California Highway Patrol. That's because the roads are deadlier than any criminals.

"That BMW's about as distinctive a car as you could hope for," Malone said, twisting the steering wheel to come out of a brief slide. He didn't slow down, though. "All we gotta do is find it."

"If we had some ham, we'd have ham and eggs, if we had some eggs," I said. "How are we going to find the car in the dark and the snow, in the maze of mountain streets around Idyllwild?"

"Small town. Somebody will know where the German chess player lives," Malone said, his expression showing he knew it was as stupid as it sounded. "That's where the Beemer will be."

There were trees all around us now, stately wide madronas with their peeling-paper bark red as rust and green-black old-growth pinion pines, as straight and tall as angels, their branches blanketed with powdered snow like images on a Christmas card.

The truck fishtailed and I grabbed the dashboard. "Slow down, Cus. We can't see ten feet in front of us."

But then we did see something in front of us. The red reflection of tail lights, in a thick drift off the side of the road. It was a blue BMW, stuck in the snow.

Malone slowed and came to a stop. He set the emergency brake, and his right hand went down to the grips of the Colt .45 automatic at his side.

"Moron didn't bother with chains," he said. "We were lucky. That is—I hope we're lucky."

Following his example, I opened the door on my side, reaching over my body so I could keep my hand on my Beretta.

We stepped out. Our shoes sank in the snow.

We weren't of any mind to take chances. We both drew, left hands wrapped around the right holding the grips, the tips of our index fingers resting lightly on the icy metal triggers of our weapons. Cus stepped out while I covered him from behind the hood of the truck.

Twin cones of light shone from the Ford's headlights on the fogged back window of the BMW. It was impossible to tell what was inside. The snow was very heavy now.

"Howdy, there," shouted my partner. "It's Custer Malone, Mr. Brunker. I've come to get my girl. Why don't you come on out,

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now, and spare us all a little unpleasantness?"

Crack! It was the sound of a high-powered rifle. The driver's side window of the Ford spiderwebbed. We both fell flat.

"God*damn* it," Malone cursed. "That's three hundred bucks, easy."

"I don't think he's in the car, Senator," I hissed.

"Shut up!" Malone replied in a stage whisper.

"You better be alone, Cus," Brunker's voice reached out of the darkness.

He hadn't seen me. It was too dark and there was too much snow.

"Didn't think I'd be needing the help," Malone said. "Huh. Guess I was wrong about that."

"I can use your truck, then. Give me the keys, and I'll let you live. You can even take the bitch."

"You'll have to come get 'em. I can't see you."

"No. Throw the keys out in front of you."

"If I do that, they'll disappear into the snow and you'll never find 'em."

There was a pause as Brunker mulled this over. I was shivering. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't keep still. It took all my willpower to keep my teeth from chattering.

At length, Brunker spoke. "All right. Stay where you are and lie down. Throw out your gun. I don't care if that gets lost." He chuckled, gratified at his own dumb joke. "And spread your arms out. No tricks."

"This really sucks," I heard Malone mutter, but he flung his pistol away, sunk to his knees, and stretched out in the snow, still holding his arms out from his body. I know how much he loves that Gold Cup. It must have been torture to toss it.

I heard the crunching of boots on snow as Brunker came out of the trees. He held a hunting rifle. He walked up cautiously, never allowing the long black barrel out of line with Malone's prostrate body.

Finally he stood above Malone.

"Is it okay if I reach into my pocket for the keys?" Malone asked.

"Never mind. I'll just get them off your body." He put the butt of the rifle against his shoulder.

"Yo, *padrone!*" I yelled.

Brunker jerked in my direction and I opened fire. At the police academy, they teach you to empty your magazine, but I only got off four rounds before he collapsed.

We found Nora Moon in the trunk of the BMW, her wrists,

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ankles, and mouth wrapped up with duct tape. She had bled a little from her scalp where Brunker had struck her, but luckily she had on a winter coat and hadn't lost enough body heat to hypothermia to put her in a coma. When we got the tape off her face, her only comment was to Malone.

"What do you mean, boss, you came to get your *girl?*"

"You know, hon," he said, oozing his particular brand of Texas mojo, "you can take the boy from the country . . . "

He just shook his head, smiling broadly. Then he went to find his pistol.

I called 911—I was surprised to actually get a signal up there—and some Riverside County sheriff's deputies and an ambulance came up from the desert hellhole of Hemet. Thereafter, it was a long night in one of California's not-such-a-garden spots.

Thor Brunker died from his wounds that night in the Hemet hospital.

It wasn't the first time I've had to kill a man, but I hope it's the last.

The sheriffs didn't give us much grief, not after they called Beverly Hills. Cops know how important it is to look after your own, and that's what Cus and I had done with Nora, after all. We were released, but Nora was admitted for observation, so we got a couple of rooms at the Motel 8 and stayed the night.

Subsequent investigation by the Beverly Hills cops revealed that the whole watch provenance deal had been a scam from beginning to finish. Brunker had prepared an ornate false trail for Stowicz to follow, "proving" the Morphy watch's authenticity, but his plan was derailed almost from the beginning when we sent Moon to interview Lieber instead.

I went to visit the mysterious Hamilton Hogue in San Francisco, and he hotly denied any knowledge of the watch or even of Friedrich Lieber. I'm sure he was lying, but I didn't have any leverage, so I let it drop. Sometimes you have to. For a while, anyway.

The Carmel address of "John R. Ferguson" turned out to be nothing but a mailbox with an affluent zip code, just as Custer Malone had guessed. The litigious Madame Saulnier proved a phantom.

And so did the watch. We never found it.

It had obviously been Brunker's plan to jack up the watch's value as high as he could, but we never found out how he intended to cash in. It was probably some complicated scheme. One thing was perfectly clear, though, and that's Brunker did not

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intend Friedrich Lieber to be its owner for very long.

"Thor always was too baroque with his strategy, always planning too far ahead," Stowicz reminisced. "That's why I always beat him at chess. Couldn't see the board for the pieces. He could brag about his cold reason, but what did it get him?"

"What about the watch?" Malone asked.

"*Feh*. Gone. So let it disappear. It's *farsholtn*."

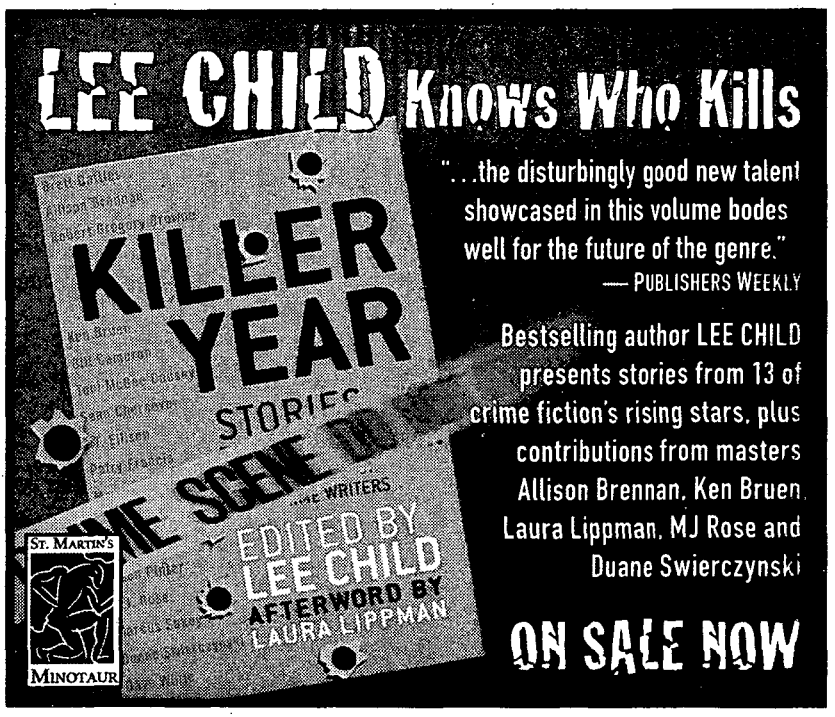
"It's what?"

"You know, cursed. Think about it. The original owner went mad and bankrupt pursuing a paranoid lawsuit. Nora gets herself kidnapped. Thor Brunker also went bankrupt and even got himself killed. It only stands to reason, cold or not."

"It does?" I asked.

"Of course. What, you never heard of Morphy's law?"

And he sat there, smiling and placid, until I threw my dictionary at him. The big dictionary, but it missed. I never knew Stanley was so quick.



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WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR

RUSSEL D. MCLEAN

THURSDAY, 0130 HRS.

The phone was screaming. I reached out, grabbed the receiver off the hook, and pulled it into the warm dark with me. I held it to my ear and muttered something into the line. Beside me, Ros was waking up. She pressed herself against me.

On the other end of the phone, Sandy's girlfriend Katie was trying to tell me something. She sounded breathless, her words rushing together.

Katie only ever talked to me on sufferance. She blamed me whenever Sandy spent the night out at the pub or when he got involved in some business he had no business involving himself in. She felt our friendship was damaging to his career as a D.I. with Tayside Constabulary. So for her to call me at all, never mind in such an emotional state, set me instantly on edge.

"Sam," she said, pulling herself together. "They've arrested him."

"Who?"

"Sandy," she said. She didn't sound like she quite believed it herself.

"What?"

"I got a call from some D.I. . . . Duncan, that's the name."

D.I. Duncan, known informally as "Donuts" among some of the lads. He was a rotund and comfortable-looking detective who tended to take the easy way out of any situation. If Duncan was in charge at this stage, then there could be no doubt that Professional Standards would be looking into the situation very soon. Donuts wouldn't want the hassle of an internal investigation on his watch. Better to palm the problem off to those whose job it was to bust other coppers.

I looked at the bedside clock, saw it was half-one in the morning.

Katie continued: "The D.I. called me half an hour ago, said Sandy was being questioned about an assault. I couldn't get any more out of him. He kept saying that the affair was internal and I

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would be updated as and when the situation required."

I was already swinging my legs out of bed. "I'll meet you at the station, aye? The public entrance round the back, all right?"

"Aye," she said. "Okay."

"Half an hour," I said.

"Right."

I hung up, got to my feet, and stretched.

Sandy Griggs arrested by his own. Professional Standards had gone after him before, but never like this. They hadn't been able to make anything stick, and soon enough they'd learned their lesson: Sandy Griggs was a copper with a temper. But he was a great detective and an asset to the force.

Ros poked her head out from under the sheets. The moonlight coming through the window illuminated her gentle features. The window of my bedroom looked out onto the large shared garden of the tenement. No one could see us, and I liked to sleep under the light of the moon.

"Hon," she said, her beautiful Alabama accent dulled with sleep, "What's going on?"

"Sandy," I said. "He's in trouble." I stumbled about, tried to find my trousers where I had left them on the bedroom floor.

"Sounds serious."

"I hope it's a misunderstanding," I said, finding my trousers, pulling them on. I started to look for a shirt as well, found a blue one crumpled nearby.

"Can I do anything?"

"No," I said. "I don't think so. I'm just going to go, find out what's happening, okay?"

"Okay," she said. "Call me soon as you learn anything."

"Aye," I said. I buttoned the shirt, walked to the bed, leant down, and kissed her. She smelled warm and comfortable. I wanted to crawl back under the covers, lie beside her, and forget about the rest of the world.

"Love you," she said.

I smiled, told her how I felt, and left.

I was still feeling the weight of sleep in my eyes when I got in the BMW. I stretched in the driver's seat, yawned. I put the key in the ignition, jumped in my skin when the CD player came on. Freak Power demanded I turn on, tune in, and drop out. I kicked the engine, pulled out of the parking space, and turned onto the Perth Road, heading towards the city center.

I pulled in at the rear of the police station in the public car park. Katie was waiting for me on the steps, smoking a cigarette.

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The end burned bright in the dark.

I parked the car, got out, and walked over to her. We stood at an awkward distance from each other, and I asked her how she was doing.

"Well as can be expected," she said, her voice clipped. She dropped her cigarette, ground it out with her heel. "They said someone would be out to talk to me."

I said maybe she should have some company for the meeting. She agreed, reluctantly.

I felt like grabbing a cigarette. Although I told Ros I'd given up, there was still a spare packet in my jacket. An aid to concentration, something to do while I was trying to figure out the situation.

But I didn't have time to pull them out. Not tonight.

I followed Katie into the station. The guy on reception looked up, smiled when he saw me. I'd met him before. He was a greasy little man who enjoyed the power he held behind the glass. I didn't know his name, never really cared to.

"Bryson," he said. "Shouldae figured you'd be here. D.I. Griggs is really in the shit." His voice dripping with barely restrained disgust at my presence. More than the usual police antagonism reserved for private investigators. He was one of those who had been glad to see the back of me when I left.

"Aye," I said. "I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding."

"Try telling that tae the fella he put in the hospital," said the rat behind the glass. "Oh aye, he's messed up good this time." He took a sip from the coffee that sat on his workstation. "Somebody'll be down tae see you. You'll understand that D.I. Duncan has his hands full right now, so he regrets he cannae talk to ye directly."

I nodded. Katie and I grabbed a seat at the far side of the room. Waiting in silence.

Finally, someone arrived to talk to us: Constable Susan Bright. I knew her a little from my time on the force, but she was Sandy's friend more than mine. She smiled when she saw me, but there was an apology about her expression that told me she was here against her better judgment.

"So what's up?" I asked, not bothering to stand.

"This is difficult for me, Sam," Susan said. "I like Sandy—D.I. Griggs."

"Just doing your job," I said, surprised that my words came out with such venom.

Her eyes flicked to her feet, came back up again. "Maybe we can talk in private," she said. "All three of us."

Susan ushered us through the secure doors and into the station. She took us to the canteen, which was quiet this early in the

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morning. She grabbed us some coffee and we sat at a plastic table. No one said a word for nearly a minute. Finally, Susan realized she'd have to be the one to break the ice.

"Around half past ten yesterday evening," she said, "a man named Andy Dobbs came out the Clep Bar up the east end of the city."

I nodded. I knew where it was. The Clep was one of Dundee's more famous bars, an established working man's club that had retained an old-fashioned atmosphere while somehow managing to keep up with the times.

"Dobbs is a convicted criminal," she continued, "arrested several times on domestic disturbance. Recently divorced and taken to the cleaners. His ex-wife been helped in no small part by D.I. Griggs, who was also Dobbs's arresting officer."

Sandy was a sucker for domestic abuse cases; he took them more than personally. Sandy had spent much of his adolescence attempting to escape the legacy of his father, a brutal and violent man who had systematically abused Sandy's mother before finally killing her.

Joining the police gave Sandy the chance to direct the anger towards criminals and other unsavory types, but when it came to wife batterers, Sandy was a crusader. One D.C.I. even called Sandy a vigilante with a uniform, but despite this branding, Sandy always pulled back before his zeal impaired his better judgment.

Though some questioned his methods, Sandy's reputation had always been upheld in public. It helped that he was a popular man among his colleagues and contemporaries.

"Dobbs was heading out the bar," Susan continued, "ready to wend his merry way back home, when someone yelled his name from across the street. He looked up, saw D.I. Griggs. Shouting, swearing, telling Dobbs how he got off light this time."

Sandy had been upset about Dobbs's early release from prison. Time off for good behavior. Upon hearing that Dobbs was going to be a useful member of society once more, Sandy told me he found it hard to believe a man like that was rehabilitated after what amounted to little more than a slap on the wrist.

"Dobbs ignored the D.I.," said Susan. "According to his version of events, he kept walking, you know, not rising to the bait."

I shook my head. "I never met Dobbs, but from what Sandy said, he sounded like the kind of guy who'd rise to the bait without thinking twice."

Susan nodded, agreeing with my assessment. But she continued, "The way he looked when he got to hospital means that a lot of people are going to believe him." She took a deep breath. "In his version, Sandy follows him home and beats him up outside his

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own front door. I've seen the man. It was one hell of a kicking."

"How bad?" Katie asked.

Susan looked uncomfortable. "Bad," she said. "Dobbs is still in hospital. Two broken ribs, cuts, bruises, possible concussion."

I nodded, kept quiet. Given Sandy's attitude and his frequent public confrontations with scum like Dobbs, it could have been a plausible story. But Sandy wouldn't pull that kind of stunt; he'd worked too long and hard at escaping the worst excesses of his anger. Even Dobbs couldn't drive him this far over the edge.

"D.I. Duncan's talking to Sandy now," said Susan. "Trying to piece together what happened."

"But he thinks Sandy's guilty," I said. It wasn't a question.

"Sandy's denying it ever happened," said Susan. "But the state of this guy, Sam . . ."

"And that's all you've got?" I said. "Dobbs turns up with a few bruises and a sob story and you believe him that Sandy Griggs did this to him?"

"It's enough. D.C.I. Hawley was the man who pulled in Sandy. Immediately put Donuts up front as the investigating officer."

I stood up, kicked back the chair. Katie looked shocked, recoiled in her chair. Susan remained where she was, trying to keep calm, but I could see something in her eyes that looked almost like regret.

"You've worked with Sandy, you know what kind of man he is, Susan! All that's going straight in the bin on the word of one low-life piece of shite?"

Susan shook her head. "Not on that, no," she said. "It's more complicated." She looked at me, caught my eyes with hers. I knew it then, what she was asking without asking me. Someone had seen the assault; they had an eyewitness. And while Duncan might take Dobbs's word as gospel, Susan was only going along with departmental policy on this case.

"I'll bet," I said and walked out of the canteen.

1045 HRS.

Susan was in her civvies. She took a seat across from me. We were seated on the balcony of the Starbucks on the second level of the Overgate Shopping Centre. The Centre is the only single side shopping mall in Europe, and the glass wall crooks around the back of the City Centre churches, with protruding balconies on the second level serving as extra seating for coffee shops and eateries. Below, on the paved walkway that separated the church and the Centre, skate kids pulled tricks and messed around.

"You wanted to talk?" she said.

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"You know as well I do that Sandy's innocent."

She nodded. "I'm with you, Sam, there's no way Sandy would pull that kind of stunt. He takes these kinds of things personally, but . . ."

"It's not his style."

Susan slurped at her hot chocolate. She shivered, blew out cold air. We were the only people out on the balcony. The morning air was still sharp, but at least it wasn't raining, even if the sky was intent on keeping people guessing.

"You've done Sandy favors," she said. "The Dudman fiasco, others. Unofficial, of course, and never on the force's budget."

I sat back in my chair. "You're requesting my services?"

"Is there some kind of screening process?"

"In this case there's no charge." I sat forward again, placed my hands on the tabletop. "Thing is, I'm always telling my clients I don't guarantee happiness."

Susan nodded. "There's a witness. But Duncan's not exactly forthcoming. Him and the D.C.I. are keeping this quiet. Nobody knows anything."

Donuts wasn't the man who worried me. He was the kind of fat, lazy man who followed orders from on high without question.

D.C.I. Mark Hawley, on the other hand, was an unknown element. Originally from Dundee, he had worked out of Edinburgh for ten years before transferring back here. The transfer had occurred a few months before I left, barely giving me time to form an opinion of the man. My first impressions weren't positive, however. There was something in his attitude that put me on edge. A shiftiness in the way he moved and talked that made me think of the worst kind of con man. Yet he clearly had some talent for the job to have risen to the rank of D.C.I. at a relatively young age.

I asked Susan, "I'm assuming you've already tried to get the name of this witness?"

She nodded. "Donuts doesn't want to talk. Or he's not allowed to."

"So maybe we don't ask him." It wouldn't make any difference if I asked. My relationship with Donuts had been just a nip below hostile. No way he'd just hand over sensitive information to the likes of me.

Susan looked apprehensive. "The question remains," she said, "what if Sandy is guilty?"

"If he is," I said, "then it's the truth." I tried to act blasé, but I knew that kind of truth would make the world a far darker place than I ever wanted it to be.

1423 HRS.

We were in the canteen, sharing a coffee. The room was quiet,

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but we'd been counting on that. Donuts was already three minutes late. He was a man who kept a schedule like clockwork unless there was some reason to break it. Nevertheless, he'd been here as close to his usual break as possible.

Sure enough, the D.I. stomped into the canteen. He looked like a man who had seen very little sleep over the past few days. His skin was pale and his eyes were gently bloodshot. His normally smooth moon face showed signs of stubble, and he walked with his usual stoop exaggerated, as though he was carrying some immense weight about his shoulders.

He clocked me and Susan sitting together. He came across and said, "What the bloody hell is he doing here?"

"Sandy's my mate," I said. "I came to find out if there was anything I can do."

"You can keep your nose out of this," he said. Then to Susan: "Jesus, Bright, you should really choose your friends more carefully."

"Susan was telling me about your progress in . . ."

That got him. He straightened up like someone had sent a jolt of electricity through his spine. His mean little eyes fixed on Susan and he said, "Officer Bright, a word if you don't mind." He glared at me. "In private."

I waited for them to leave the room. Then I stood and slipped out the other door. I knew Susan could keep Duncan busy for a few minutes, but soon enough she'd be pushing her luck.

I made my way to the C.I.D. office. A few detectives were milling around. Most of them I knew, and I hoped they were too wrapped up in their own business to notice this interloper.

I made for Donuts's desk, all the while feeling like there was a hand about to land on my shoulder and a voice waiting to tell me I was about to be nicked for trespassing. I checked the computer first, moving the mouse, swearing when I saw the password box appear. I didn't have time to go hacking, not unless I got real lucky. I looked back at the desk, saw printed memos and reports spread out in a pattern I guess probably made sense to Donuts. I sifted through them, looking for anything that made sense. After a few sheets, I found a piece of lined paper with a name and number written on it. F. Beaney, and a local area code. I pulled a notebook from my inside jacket pocket, jotted down the name and number. I knew F. Beaney and why Donuts had his number.

1704 HRS.

Frank Beaney was a regular at the Crow and Claw. The Crow and Claw was probably one of the safest places to drink in Dundee, but if you stepped on anyone's toes inside, it wouldn't

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seem quite so safe when you got outside onto the street. The landlord—Big Ian Machie—had zero tolerance for violence on his premises.

Beaney was there when I arrived, standing at the bar and enjoying a quick pint of Tennant's. Big Ian was down the other end of the long, dark wood bar that dominated the east wall, talking to a few of the other punters, men whose taste in drink he appreciated a little more.

I walked straight up to Beaney, stood beside him until he turned round. He recoiled a little when he recognized me. "Hey, Sam," he said, his voice quavering. "How're ye doing?" Beaney was a short man with a skinny frame that looked ready to snap in two. His head was too big for his body, always in danger of tipping too far over and rolling right off his skinny wee shoulders. His eyes were wide, but hidden behind thick plastic glasses that hung uncomfortably from his bulbous nose.

"Fine," I said. "Still in the informing business, eh?"

He chuckled. "It wis gettin' a bitty dangerous, likes," he said. "So I dinnae dae aw that so much anymore."

I nodded. "D.I. Duncan's got a current address and number," I said. "So maybe you and him are, like, pals now after all the experiences you shared together."

"Get tae hell," he hissed. "Dinnae think I'm no wise tae why yer here, likes!"

"You saw something," I said. "Or so you say."

"I'm a reliable witness," he said.

"Aye," I said. "A professional!"

"That's right," said Beaney. "I know what I saw and anyone who's anyone knows that I dinnae make that kind ae nonsense up!"

"Not if the money's right," I said. "What the hell do you think you are? You're lowlife scum, the kind of bastard who'd sell his mother out if someone paid enough."

Beaney hesitated. There was no time to piss around. I grabbed him by the collar of his orange and black DUFC top, pulled him off the barstool. He screamed. Using the momentum, I walked him back to the far wall and slammed him against it. His head rocked, as his crown smashed against the wood paneling. He cried out and I wrapped a hand round his skinny little neck. He started to crawl up the wall, like he was Spider-Man, trying to escape my grip.

"What the hell is going on?" yelled Big Ian, striding across the pub floor. He laid a heavy hand on my shoulder, gripped hard. We knew each other; he wouldn't hurt me unless I gave him good reason. I let go my grip on Beaney's neck and stepped away, my head

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bowed to acknowledge I had broken the unspoken rules of the Crow and Claw.

"We'll be havin' none ae that in this place!" said Big Ian. He looked right at me. "You should know better, son."

I nodded, keeping my eyes locked on Beaney, who was trying to stand his ground but wanting just to run and hide in a corner. Afraid because he knew I wouldn't give in until I got the truth from him. But it wasn't just fear of what I would do. Whoever had persuaded him to step forward and lie about what he saw had Beaney petrified, scared of his own shadow.

"So are you lads gonnae keep it down or dae I have tae ask ye tae leave?"

I looked at Ian, shrugged. "I guess I'll be going," I said. "Sorry about that. Things got a little emotional, aye?" Acting the unapologetic hard man for Beaney's sake.

"Aye," said Big Ian. He looked at me oddly, as though trying to figure out why I'd break the code of behavior set down in the hearts and minds of regular drinkers at the Crow and Claw. Maybe I didn't pop in as often as I used to since I got digs closer to the centre of town, but I knew his pub and his rules. I hoped he'd understand that I had my reasons for breaking them.

Out the front of the Crow and Claw, I sparked up. Taxis rushed past, not bothering to slow down. A few lads in Burberry caps came past, gave me a look as though to ask just what I was doing in their part of town. Beaney didn't come out. I wasn't expecting him to.

I finished the cigarette, stamped it on the pavement before heading up the alley that ran between the Crow and Claw and a wee chip shop next door.

The alley came out on waste ground. The kind of place where bored kids gathered after hours to fight, smoke, and drink illicit tins. I'd second-guessed Beaney; he'd think I was waiting for him out front. He came out the back door, found me there waiting.

He tried to run back inside, but I caught him, threw him to the ground where even his skinny frame forced a cloud of dust into the air. He lay on his back and looked up at me, his eyes challenging me, still unable to believe I'd really go through with this. I had some reputation for being able to hold my own, but in general I was known to use violence only sparingly.

"Do you want to tell me, Beaney?" I said. "Because we both know you're a pretty good talker, good at telling tales."

He shot me the finger, but only for a second, wrapping it back up in a fist again like he hoped I hadn't seen it.

I kicked my foot between his legs. Stopped myself right before impact and then gently pressed down with the toe of my boot. He

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looked at my foot and then up at my face. I smiled, pressed down a little harder. His face twisted with discomfort.

"I don't imagine you'd want kids, Beaney," I said. "I hope to God you haven't got any already, poor sods they'd be."

He didn't say anything.

"All I want is a name. I just need to know whoever it was put you up to being the star witness in this travesty."

"I cannae tell ye that!" said Beaney breathlessly. I increased the pressure quickly, released it again. He squealed. "Seriously, man! He'll dae me if I say anything!"

"It'll be nothing compared to what'll happen if you keep quiet."

"Aw, Jaysis, man!" Caught between that rock and hard place, Beaney had the look of a rabbit in headlights. Finally, his cowardly instincts gave out and he opted to save himself here and now. "Was a D.C.I., awright? One ae your lot!"

"Not my lot anymore," I reminded him. "And save me the shite."

"Man, I'm serious. Name of Hawley, this prick. Your lot pulled me in on bullshit charges, saying I nicked these books from some shop in the Overgate. Which never happened, man. Cannae stand reading. Rather watch a good flick, ken?" He spoke fast. I had to concentrate to keep up. You can spend all your life in the city and still never get used to the patter of guys like Beaney. "So I'm sitting the room, aye, and the door opens and this D.C.I. walks in and, man, I'm bricking it. Because what does he want with a prick like me? He sits down and he tells me that's it, man. I'm going tae the jail. No excuses. No nothing. He'll see tae it himself. He says with my record, I'm getting more than a slap on the wrist. I tell him I dinnae dae nothing. And he laughs." Beaney kept talking. Telling me how the D.C.I. said Beaney had one chance to get off these charges. Beaney cooperated to save his own skin.

"Change your mind," I said. "I'll guarantee you stay out of jail. On those charges. Anything else, I can't help."

"Except you're no a copper anymore. You're naebody. What can you do for me?"

"Look me in the eyes," I said and squeezed down again with my foot. "Tell me whose word you trust. Me or the bent D.C.I.?"

He looked confused for a second, but the pain focused him and he said, "If you're messing me about . . ."

I shook my head. No need to even laugh off his threat. He knew as well as I did how empty it was.

Finally, Beaney said, "Jaysis, man, awright, awright!"

I released the pressure. He scrabbled away from me.

"Don't forget," I told him. "I can find you, Beaney. And this is a serious business. If you've lied about anything, I'll make this wee

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experience seem like a tickle from a feather duster."

"Aye," he said. "Sure, chief, whatever you say!" He clambered to his feet and ran off. At the far end of the waste ground, he jumped a low wall and ran off round the side of a nearby High Rise.

I adjusted my jacket self-consciously before walking back through the alley.

1739 HRS.

Andy Dobbs looked like he'd been mauled by a mountain lion. His skin was battered, bruised, and split. One eye was half shut. The exposed areas of his upper body were wrapped in bandages. He looked at me when I entered the room and said, "Dae I know you?"

"I work with the police," I said, a convenient half truth.

He tried to nod, but his movements were limited. "They gonnae throw him in prison, aye?" he said. "Like, ye cannae say coppers are above the law, man."

I smiled. "The investigation's ongoing."

"Ongoing?" he said, his voice cracking with incredulity. "He attacked me, put me in the hospital, man!"

I nodded like I understood what he was saying. "I have to ask you a few more questions," I said.

He seemed to understand and relaxed a little. "Like what?"

I cleared my throat, consulted my notebook. "Like why you'd put with a beating like that in order to frame an innocent man."

He didn't reply.

"There's a guy who's paying you a fair amount to blame your present condition on D.I. Griggs," I prompted him.

"What the hell's this about, man?" he said. "I dunno what ye're . . ." I cut him off by delivering a swift punch to his upper body, catching him just below his broken ribs. Even through the painkillers, I knew he felt it.

"I'm going to find him, and I'm going to make sure he faces justice," I said. "With or without your help, Mr. Dobbs. I think you'd prefer it if I did it with."

"Who are you?" he said, his voice broken with the pain.

I smiled, sat down again, and said, "I'm the man you're going to talk to."

1800 HRS.

D.C.I. Hawley was an unknown quantity to me. But his was the name that Dobbs had given, confirming Beaney's version of events.

Hawley had only served with Tayside for a few years. As far as I was aware, he had no public trouble with Sandy. A fact that left

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me with more questions than answers. The big one being why Hawley would go to all this trouble in the first place.

It was only twenty minutes after my encounter with Dobbs, but already I could feel my body beginning to shake. Ashamed at my use of physical force, as though I had somehow let myself down.

Behaving like a vigilante, storming in without taking into consideration the consequences of my actions: the very thing that had led to my leaving the force, walking out before they could give me my marching orders.

I thought I had left that part of myself behind. Since Ros came into my life, she had been instrumental in helping me deal with that side of my personality. Which meant I hadn't only failed myself, but Ros as well.

The realization only made the sick feeling in my stomach seem heavier.

But I was too far down the road to think about going into reverse. Sandy was my friend, and for whatever reason, Hawley was determined to destroy the man's career. I couldn't sit back and let that happen. After all that Sandy had done for me down the years, sticking beside me when no one else would, I owed him all of this and so much more.

It was just past six when I sat in the BMW in the car park outside FHQ with the engine idling and Leonard Cohen mumbling on the CD player. Susan came round the side of the building, slipped into the passenger seat. She handed me a folder.

Inside, D.C.I. Hawley's professional career was laid out in stark, black type. I skimmed the details, looking for anything that could explain his behavior.

A name stood out.

Emergency contact. Hawley's brother-in-law. A local lad with every reason to hate D.I. Sandy Griggs.

I shut the folder, looked at Susan, and saw the question in her eyes.

I told her everything.

1824 HRS.

In the course of his career, local councillor Alex Combe had never been far away from controversy. He had been implicated in a cash scandal during the nineties, accused of taking bribes from companies who were interested in the city's rejuvenation and required an assured place in the new, millennial Dundee. The charges, of course, were never proven, and although there was much whispering in the press and throughout the ranks of the police, he never even came close to being charged, never mind arrested.

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He was known to be a friend of local businessman and supposedly ex-criminal George Burns, an allegedly reformed hardman who quietly controlled much of Dundee's criminal activity, even if he had never been officially charged.

But before all of that came to light, back when he was just another faceless local councillor making promises of policy change in the hope that anyone would listen, Sandy had arrested Combe on charges of indecent exposure.

Two twelve-year-old girls reported a man in his early thirties had approached them in Balgay Park early one evening and put his privates on parade for their exclusive benefit. When the girls challenged him, he ran away. Their mother had called the police, and Sandy had been the officer who knocked on their door, asked the questions, and promised to do everything in his power to apprehend the flasher.

Two hours later, following a search of the park, he arrested a man in a dark winter jacket who fit the description given by the two girls. The man's name was Alex Combe.

The investigation should have been simple, except somewhere along the line, the chain of evidence against Combe got dropped amidst whispers of outside influence and cash changing hands among the right people. The press, however, dragged Combe's name through the mud. His promising career in local politics stalled, almost flatlining. But Combe fought his way back with a ruthlessness and determination that was to be either admired or feared.

And now, over a decade later, the councillor's brother-in-law was fabricating evidence against Sandy.

It didn't take a genius to connect the dots.

It was close to half past six when I arrived at Combe's house just off the main road in Invergowrie. I moved round the back of the building, watching the house carefully, keeping an eye out for any movement. Two lights were on, one in the main hall and one round the back of the house. No other signs of life.

The back garden was large and empty. The house could easily have been a family home, but Combe lived alone, so the garden was devoid of the swings and toys that might have littered the place and was instead an empty expanse of neatly trimmed grass and token flowerbeds. I hopped the wall, walked to the back door, and knocked loudly.

Combe opened the door cautiously. I kicked it the rest of the way. He staggered back, holding both hands to his face. I knew the door hadn't hit him. He was scared more than hurt.

"What do you want?" Straightening, attempting to intimidate the intruder. With his slight frame and egg-shaped head, the

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attempted machismo failed miserably.

"What do you think?"

He shook his head. His eyes were wide and his face was flushed. His brow glistened with sweat.

"You've been holding one hell of a grudge," I said. "That's a long time to wait until you try and take your revenge on a man."

"I don't know what . . ."

"D.I. Sandy Griggs," I said. "Back in the day, of course, just a wee constable doing his duty. You should have gone to court, councillor. You should have been arrested. Chucked out of politics, local and national."

"A man can change."

"Aye, you changed. That's why I'm here, to tell you how well you've done, what a good guy you are getting your brother-in-law to fit up an innocent man."

"That's slander . . ."

"Shut up," I said, stepping forward. "I want you to call Hawley. Tell him his witnesses are going to change their tune. He'll drop the charges against Sandy right now because if he doesn't, it's Hawley's name goes in the crapper."

"I had nothing to do with . . ."

I stepped forward, punched him hard and low in the stomach. He dropped to his knees.

"Call him," I said. "Or both of you are screwed."

2156 HRS.

When I arrived back at the flat, Ros was in the front room watching *North Tonight* with unfocused eyes and her arms wrapped tightly round her stomach. She looked up when I came in. "They dropped the charges against Sandy," she said.

"They'd never have held."

"Even he doesn't know why. He called here, you know, asking to have a word."

"I'll buzz him tomorrow," I said. For now, the crisis had been averted, but life rarely ties itself up neatly. When Combe was finished being scared and started talking to Hawley, God only knew the kind of trouble that me and Sandy would be facing. The threat of Dobbs and Beaney talking would only keep them quiet for so long.

Ros stood up. She came over and wrapped her arms around me, laying her head on my shoulder. I could smell her perfume. It made me think of everything that was beautiful in this world, those moments that make life worth living.

After a few moments, she stepped back and said, "Where were you?"

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I thought about Dobbs and Beaney. Their eyes wide with fear at what they believed I would do to them. And Combe, on his knees, weeping like a baby.

I thought about what I had done. What I had wanted to do.

Ros said, "Sam?"

For a moment, I felt tears in my eyes. I stepped forward and hugged Ros tight, holding onto her as if she were all in this world that mattered.

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THE HARD CASE

ROBERT LOPRESTI

When the sheriff walked into the diner, Keegan was sitting at the counter, trying to decide if the scrambled eggs they served here were worse than those at the prison or just different. He had finally decided it didn't matter—bad was bad—when he heard the click of a revolver being cocked.

Keegan looked up. The young waitress was casting a worried look over his shoulder. In the mirror behind her he saw the sheriff pointing a gun at him. The lawman was young and looked nervous. His gun hand trembled a little. Not what you wanted to see when someone is pointing a pistol at your head.

Keegan had a fork in one hand, a coffee cup in the other. He put them both down on the counter, carefully. "Good morning, Sheriff."

"Good morning." The sheriff spoke softly, but his voice was hoarse with adrenalin. "Here's what I'd like you to do. Put your hands on the counter, please. Palms down."

Keegan did so, slow as molasses.

"Now, move them out to the sides, as far as they'll go."

Again, Keegan complied. It was tempting to stare at the gun in the mirror, but he kept his eyes on the black of the sheriff's sunglasses. "Is there a problem?"

"What's your name, sir?"

"Ray Keegan."

"I'm told you just finished twenty-five years at Longman State Penitentiary. That right?"

Keegan blinked. Somebody must have overheard him using the pay phone last night, right here in this diner. "That's true, Sheriff."

"I also hear you're going to California to visit your sister."

Now, where had he heard that? Keegan had only mentioned it once, when he was in the jewelry store, looking for a present for Maggie. Was everyone in this little town keeping an eye on visitors? "Right again," he said.

"Won't that violate your parole? Leaving the state?"

Keegan smiled. "No parole for me, Sheriff."

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"You served the whole sentence? No time off for good behavior? You must be a real hard case."

"That's been said," Keegan agreed. His hands were getting tired of pressing down on the counter. "Is that all?"

"When were you in the Paradigm Jewelry Store this morning?"

"I wasn't. I was there yesterday."

"I've got a witness who saw you there this morning."

"Then ask him when I was there."

"Somebody robbed the store and shot the owner."

"It wasn't me."

"Yes, it was!" said another voice. "You killed my uncle!" This came from a short man, barely into his twenties. He was standing behind the sheriff. Keegan got a feeling he was a very brave man when someone else stood between him and trouble.

"Be quiet, Eddy," said the sheriff.

Keegan remembered the kid now. He had been pushing a broom in the jewelry store the day before. Probably had been in the diner when Keegan was making his phone call too. Things were clearing up a little.

He sighed. "Look, Sheriff. That gun makes me nervous. How about you handcuff me and then we can both relax?"

"Sounds like a plan."

It took some negotiation. The sheriff—who seemed to have gotten all of his lines from TV—told him to "assume the position." Keegan had to explain that you couldn't do that properly against a counter since your hands were supposed to be above your head. With his patient guidance they sorted it out, while Eddy muttered vague threats and the waitress stared slack jawed.

Once the sheriff put his gun away Keegan felt more relaxed, even with his large biceps pulled back and the handcuffs pinching his wrists.

The sheriff frisked him and found nothing. "No wallet?"

"In my room."

"He's got a car, Sheriff," said Eddy. "How come he doesn't have a driver's license?"

"I walked here from the motel," said Keegan. He was tempted to say something about this country still not requiring people to carry an ID card. "My car's in the garage, getting a new alternator." That was the only reason he had spent the night in this little burg.

"How about if we go to the police station to straighten this out?" the sheriff asked.

"No problem," said Keegan. "Would you mind taking the ten dollar bill out of my shirt pocket? I haven't paid for breakfast yet."

He told the waitress to keep the change. Someone might as well

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have a good day. "The eggs tasted just like home," he told her.

The sheriff was surprised when Keegan gave him permission to send a deputy to the motel room to get his ID. Keegan knew there was nothing there that would tie him to the robbery, and he figured that if the cops were going to plant evidence he might as well know it sooner rather than later.

At the police station the cop, who introduced himself as Sheriff Hart, asked him again about the jewelry store. Keegan repeated his story. He'd been there at closing time yesterday, asking about a necklace, hoping to find something his sister might like. Mostly he had just been killing time, waiting for his car to be fixed.

"And you didn't go back this morning?"

"Nope. I slept late and walked directly to the diner for breakfast. Next thing I know you were pointing a gun at me."

Hart frowned. "What were you in prison for, Mr. Keegan?"

The door burst open and an excited deputy came in. "Sheriff, we found the gun!"

"In his room?"

"No, in the dumpster behind the motel."

Keegan saw Eddy standing outside the sheriff's office, bouncing with excitement. "I told you!" the young man crowed. "I told you he did it!"

"Shut up, Eddy," Hart said. "You got the wallet, Allen?"

"Yes, sir."

Keegan watched the sheriff go through his billfold carefully, checking the license photo against his face.

"Well, it's you."

"Not a great picture, though."

Hart flipped through the other cards in the wallet and frowned. "You are a piece of work, aren't you?"

"That's been said."

"You heard where they found the gun?"

"I did. So you figure I killed the store owner and walked out with the gun that would send me to prison. I carried it four blocks and then dropped it exactly where it would incriminate me. Is that the idea?"

"You got a point," Hart said. He put down the wallet. "Allen, go check that dumpster again. See if you can find anything from the jewelry store."

"Right, Sheriff."

"Eddy, get in here."

The skinny man poked his head in the door. "Sheriff?"

"This is not gonna be the slam dunk it looked like at first."

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The kid's jaw dropped. "But why? He's an ex-con, right out of prison! And your man found the gun."

"That's just it," said Hart. "Mr. Keegan points out that any lawyer worth his salt could convince a jury that an experienced robber like him would never have left the gun in a place that would lead straight to him."

Eddy blinked. "You can't let him get away with this, Sheriff. He killed Uncle Jake!"

"Believe me, I want him to get what's coming to him, son. But what we need is a witness. Someone who saw him coming or going at the shop today."

The young man looked miserable. "Well, I don't know who that would be. I told you I got there ten minutes after opening time and found my uncle dead on the floor."

"I know that's what you *said*." Hart was patient. "But I'm wondering if, now that you've had time to think it over, maybe you remembered getting there just in time to see this joker leaving."

"Hey now," said Keegan softly.

"You shut up," said Hart. "No one's gonna believe what an ex-con says anyway." He turned back to the nephew. "What do you say, son?"

Eddy licked his lips. "You're putting me in an awkward position, Sheriff."

"Not as awkward as your Uncle Jake's position right now. But if you don't care enough—"

"Okay!" Keegan saw the kid make up his mind. "Yes, sir. I guess I got to the alley just in time to see him—" He pointed at Keegan. "—running out the back door."

"Well, that's great. That helps." The sheriff nodded. "Now, why didn't you say so?"

"What?"

"His lawyer is gonna want to know why you changed your story. Maybe you didn't want to admit you had a key to the back door?"

Keegan thought the kid was going to be sick. "What are you doing to me?"

The sheriff scratched his chin. "Because your Uncle Jake told me some stuff had gone missing from the store. He thought maybe you had a key he didn't know about. He said if he ever caught you where you didn't belong he'd fire you on the spot. Is that what happened this morning? You went in a little early to pick up something to pawn, and he caught you? Then you had to decide whether to be fired or to kill your uncle and inherit the store."

"Sheriff, I *told* you what happened. *He* did it—" He pointed at Keegan again.

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"That's what I was supposed to think," Sheriff Hart agreed. "An ex-con being handy to take the fall made it look even more tempting, didn't it?"

"But it was him! He was just out of prison, desperate for money—"

"Mr. Keegan here was a guard at Longman State Penitentiary." The sheriff pulled a card out of the wallet and held it up. "This is ID from the Corrections Department."

He looked at Keegan. "I take it those twenty-five years you mentioned on the phone were how long you worked there. Just retired?"

"That's right."

"Congratulations."

Eddy was wide eyed. "Then why is he still in handcuffs?"

"Good point," said Hart, pulling out his key ring. "Mr. Keegan didn't see fit to correct my assumption. I didn't know who he was until I went through his wallet."

"Well," said Keegan. "As a rule, I don't argue with anyone who has a gun pointed at my head. And I figured you could get at the truth faster if I kept quiet." He flexed his freed hands experimentally. "That's better. Thanks."

"Okay, Eddy. Your turn now. Turn around." The sheriff applied the cuffs.

"I have the worst luck," muttered Eddy.

"Not as bad as your uncle's," said the sheriff. He looked over at Keegan. "And you just sat here and let us accuse you. You're a real character, you are."

"That's been said," Keegan agreed. "Eddy, can I give you a bit of advice?"

The kid looked at him warily.

"When you get to Longman, watch out for a guy named Ortiz. He's the toughest guard there." Keegan smiled. "Now, I mean."

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

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CASE CAPPED

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG

Sister Veronica, president of St. Jude's Language School, frowned and read the note left on her desk, only too sure of what it would say:

> Got ya. Your dumb as the teachers. Dumber even than all your dumb students. They're nothing but a bunch of rednecks and greenies from dumb countries. What a joke. You're a dumb president of a dumb school.
>
> Yours trully,
> One smart thief.

Not so smart, thought Sister Veronica. You misspelled truly and, in your second sentence, you should have used you're, not your. Nevertheless, the thief had managed to break into her office and steal her radio and cassette player. Good thing she'd carried her personal laptop to class with her, or she would have lost that to the thief as one of the faculty members already had.

Sister Veronica consulted her watch. At least the thief hadn't gotten her watch. He, if it was a "he," never confronted anyone. He stole from offices while the faculty were in class. So far he'd hit five offices, including hers. Well, Sister Veronica thought, maybe Detective Davis will have some ideas.

"Have all the locks changed," Detective Davis instructed, his heavy brows lowered over his light blue eyes, as if to reprimand Sister Veronica for not having done so.

"Detective Davis, I've thought of that, of course," Sister Veronica said patiently. "But have you noticed what this building looks like? It's old, and there are twenty-five small offices for our full-time faculty and our volunteer faculty. This isn't Harvard. By golly, it isn't even the University of Maryland. It's St. Jude English Language School."

"So?" Detective Davis said, shrugging his broad shoulders.

Sister Veronica had no doubt that Detective Davis had more important duties, like finding murderers and drug dealers, but she

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found herself annoyed with his attitude. "Look, Detective Davis," she said. "I can't spare the money to have the locks changed. We rank sixtieth on the diocese's budget line of charities. We charge little or no tuition, and we aren't exactly floating in alumni endowments. Our students are maids, laborers, and agricultural workers either trying to learn a new language or brushing up on the grammar they didn't master in high school."

"Maybe the thief is a student."

"Maybe, but maybe not. The thefts have all taken place between seven, when the faculty leave their offices to teach, and nine, when they return. And, of course, that's when our students are in their classrooms."

"Well," Detective Davis said, "my district isn't exactly floating in money either. All I can do is post a man for maybe an hour for a day or two to patrol the corridors."

Sister Veronica sighed. "Thank you, Detective," she said, deciding that she would have to catch the thief of St. Jude's herself. She only hoped she could do that before the thief accidentally or intentionally confronted a student or faculty member, with serious results.

The next day she called a faculty meeting. Concerned about the thefts, even the volunteer faculty came.

"Okay," Sister Veronica said. "The thief has no trouble breaking into our offices. Then once our evening classes are over at nine, he just steps out of the office he's hit and blends in with the flow of our four hundred students down the stairs and out of the building, loot hidden in a backpack or whatever. So either we devise a way to catch him or we carry anything valuable with us at all times."

"Some of us have discussed starting and dismissing classes at staggered times," Mr. Stasek offered, sweeping out an arm to include the entire faculty. "That way, several faculty will always be in the office area."

"Can't stagger times," Mrs. Petworth said. "Our students have to catch buses, go to night jobs, get home to children."

"Well," little Mrs. Nightly piped up. "Guess we'll all have to put on our thinking caps again."

Sister Veronica quit fiddling with her miniature Nascar, sat up straight, and looked sharply at Mrs. Nightly. Of course, she thought. The plan took shape in her mind. It would work if no one, absolutely no one, leaked it. She would have to guarantee secrecy by telling no one about the plan until a few minutes before she put it into operation.

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She spent the next day shopping: K-mart, Ames, Sears, and every odd lots store she could find. She personally delivered a box of the goods to each of the twenty classrooms with a note for each instructor to open the box five minutes before dismissal and follow the instructions to a tee.

At five minutes to nine, Butch Redden had stolen some expensive-looking language books from an office and packed them into his backpack. He could sell them at a university book shop.

"Damn," he mumbled, looking around the office and seeing nothing more of value. He'd hoped for one more good hit before abandoning St. Jude's. It'd been such easy pickings. Dumb nuns. Dumb redneck students and green card immigrants, "greenies" as his uncle used to call them.

He jerked to attention when he heard the scraping of chairs from nearby classrooms. Time to make his escape. Easy. As usual, he'd just blend in with the rednecks and greenies.

He opened the door and stepped out into a group of students exiting a classroom. Something was funny, but he couldn't pinpoint what.

He started down the stairs. A nun and a burly guy stepped in front of him. "Hold it," the nun said. The burly guy whipped out a police identification card.

"B— b— but how?" Butch stammered.

"Look around," Sister Veronica said.

Butch looked. Every student wore either a green or a red wool cap. Only Butch conspicuously lacked one.

"Nice plan," Detective Davis said, smiling at Sister Veronica.

"Cost me an even thousand," she said. "But it was cheaper than changing all the locks and, given the colors I picked, a lot more satisfying."

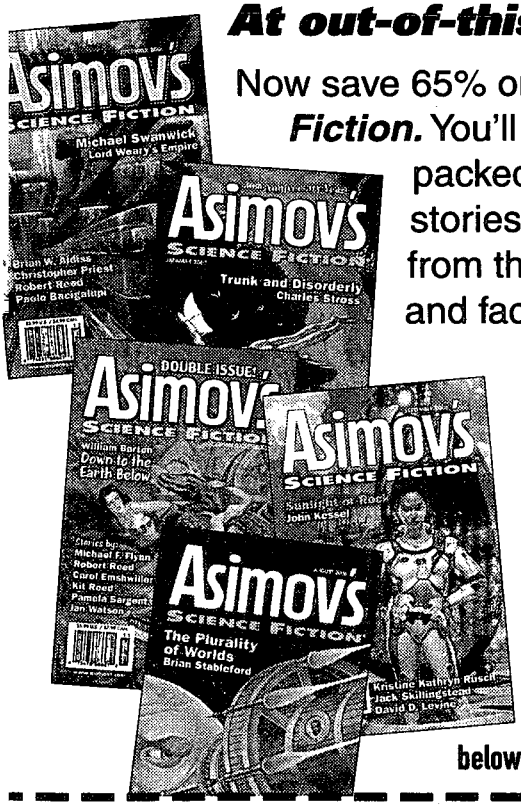


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TALKING HERSELF TO DEATH

CATHRYN GRANT

Eddie was the only person in the marketing department that wasn't sick to death of Jill Madison. Ready to kill her, in fact. Longing to kill her. Some of them even said so, right to Eddie's face. *I'd like to strangle that woman. Why doesn't someone smack her on the side of the head and shut her up permanently?*

She talked far too much. All the time. And not only did she talk too much, she talked exclusively and continuously, in painful detail, about her children. Everyone in product marketing at CompuTech knew the ages and social development of Jill's sons. They knew the boys' bedtimes, the symptoms of their childhood illnesses, the status of their loose teeth, their progress as early readers, and their brilliance at math.

Eddie was the only one who didn't mind hearing the daily review of the boys' lives. It made him feel important. It made him feel necessary. Especially now that his wife had announced she no longer needed their marriage, mostly that she didn't need Eddie, he was relieved that one person in the world still found his presence valuable.

Eddie had known Jill before she had children, and he'd watched the slow decline of her reputation. Over the years, the weight of her conversation had shifted slowly, until it was like a holiday tree laden with too many ornaments, the boughs scraping the floor with information about children, her engineering expertise buried now under layers of tinsel.

So he had made it an item on his weekly to-do list—defend Jill.

"How can you listen to her go on and on about her kids?" said Anna Percel, the program manager. She trapped Eddie in his office by closing the door and standing in front of it.

"She's my friend."

"What does your wife think of this 'friendship'?" Anna wiggled her fingers in the air, miming quotation marks.

Eddie shrugged. His wife. He couldn't tell Anna about his wife's

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Linda Weatherly

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departure. He couldn't bear to hear her pity. Worse, he might get teary eyed. Just the memory of her casual departure, a single suitcase and a garment bag. She didn't want to talk about her reasons. *Isn't it obvious,* she'd said.

"She wouldn't care," Eddie said.

"Well, Jill is going to drag you down. Her reputation for wasting work hours talking about trivia will rub off on you."

"Jill doesn't waste hours."

"Are you serious? No one can stand sitting in a meeting with her, unless they want the latest on her brats, or an update on how she saved the company."

"Everyone complains. And we all want attention for our personal lives."

"No we don't. I think you should be careful. I'm just looking out for you."

"Thanks, but not necessary."

Anna opened the frosted sliding door and walked out of his office without another word. Eddie wanted to walk two doors down and see how Jill was doing, but resisted the urge. He looked through e-mail instead, deleted a few hundred old messages, and checked the time. Four. This was the worst time of day, the lengthening shadows, evening just around the corner. Evenings that stretched on forever now that he sat alone in his cavernous house. When Angelique was still there, he could be in the upstairs office and Angelique could be out in the backyard watering plants, three hundred feet away, beyond shouting distance, but he still didn't feel alone.

The following day there was an eight o'clock meeting to review pricing. Eddie arrived in the conference room a few minutes before eight, hoping for a fresh pot of coffee on the fifteen-foot credenza that stood just below a bank of windows looking out on the southernmost tip of the San Francisco Bay. But this morning the blinds were closed to block the early sun. And there was no coffee.

The only thing sitting on top of the credenza was an enormous glass bowl. The glass was as thick as carved ice. The thing weighed about ten pounds, and the center was filled with polished amber and black stones. Pointless. Beautiful but pointless. Even with the blinds closed, Eddie could see the layer of dust coating the inside surface of the bowl.

Only Anna was in the conference room, leaning across the long mahogany table, setting up the projector.

"Jill better not be late."

"Good morning to you too," said Eddie. He thumped the case

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containing his laptop on the table and sank into the chair. "I wonder if I have time to grab a cup of coffee."

"I'm sure you do. No one else is here, and we can count on Jill to keep us all waiting."

Eddie pushed back his chair. "Everyone's late once in a while. Want a cup?"

"No."

He walked out and down the hall to the break room, poured a cup of coffee, ripped open three bags of sugar simultaneously, and watched the crystals sprinkle across the surface and dissolve. It would be a long two hours if Anna was already this hostile at eight in the morning.

When Eddie returned, three more people were seated at the table. Eddie checked his cell phone for the time. Seven minutes past. Anna couldn't very well criticize Jill for being late since the director of marketing, Carl Phillips, was also missing in action. Eddie settled in his chair and blew at the surface of his coffee, just to feel like he was doing something. The conversation of the others flowed around him, but he didn't join in. If things could get rolling without Anna hurling snide comments at Jill, he would be happy.

Carl entered the room, shoving the door open so hard it banged against the wall. He strode to the far side of the room, dropped his laptop case on the credenza so it bumped against the glass bowl, sending it skittering dangerously close to the windowsill. Eddie felt his stomach clench, worrying the bowl would chip or crack as it slid to the back. That bowl was just a dusty white elephant to most of the people in the company, but Jill loved it. An award from a partner when one of her most successful products was announced. It was an award to the entire team, but she behaved as if it were hers, dusting it from time to time, fondling the polished stones, making sure it was centered on the credenza so the others were forced to pay attention to it.

"Let's get started." Carl slurped coffee through the plastic lid of his cardboard cup and put it on the table. He settled in the chair at the head.

"We're waiting for Jill Madison," said Anna. "As always, she's late."

Eddie didn't understand why she had to say those things in front of Carl, especially when Jill wasn't there to defend herself. It would have been fine just to acknowledge they were waiting.

"She'll be here any minute," Eddie said.

"You talked to her?"

"Put up the spreadsheets and let's at least start looking at them," said Carl.

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"I don't have them. She didn't e-mail them to me."

"Then reschedule." Carl stood and slurped his coffee again.

"This was the only time on your calendar this week," Anna said. "Eddie, call Jill and find out what the problem is. You should have already done that while we were waiting."

Eddie located her number and pressed the button to dial. After a few rings, the phone went to her voice mail. He stood and walked out of the room and a few steps down the hallway. He spoke in a low voice into the phone, "Jill, where are you? Hurry up." He felt his message was foolish. Certainly she was trying to get there, and if she was stuck in traffic she couldn't get there any faster.

He slipped the phone back in his pocket and looked up. Jill was strolling down the hallway.

"Hurry," Eddie called, his voice louder than he'd intended.

"I am. Traffic was horrible."

"They won't care. You're fifteen minutes late."

"Nothing I can do about that. I can't make the traffic move faster."

"Carl's angry. Anna isn't going to miss a single chance to make you look bad."

"I had to drop off the kids. I can't leave them earlier than the school allows. What am I supposed to do?"

Eddie sighed. He wished she would at least act as if she were concerned what the others thought. He opened the door and held it for her.

"Where the hell were you?" snapped Anna. "You've kept us all waiting. You should have sent your spreadsheets to me last night."

"I was stuck in traffic."

"We all have traffic," said Carl. "Stop talking and get your laptop connected."

As if she had all the time in the world, Jill unzipped her case and gently removed her laptop. She waited for it to power up. "I had to drop my kids off. And I didn't send the spreadsheets because I was working on them until four this morning. Jared had an upset stomach and threw up carrots and potatoes all over his bed. I was too tired to log on to e-mail."

Eddie looked at Carl, who appeared a bit queasy at the graphic description. Anna put her hand over her mouth as if she was also going to vomit. "That's disgusting."

The meeting was a painful barrage of challenges to Jill's analysis. When Carl left the room, he once again knocked his laptop case against the glass bowl, sending it sliding in the opposite direction. One day that bowl was going to end up on the floor.

The others scurried out the door after Carl, heads down, hold-

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ing their collective breath hoping not to get roped into the tension that knifed the atmosphere.

"If you put me in that position ever again," said Anna, "you'll regret it for the rest of your life."

"Are you talking to me?" Jill's face sagged as if all her worries were dripping down her skin, pulling it toward her jaw.

Eddie felt like the child in the fairy tale, needing to shove his finger into a small hole in a dam he couldn't possibly shore up, but he had to try. "It was a fluke. We accomplished what we needed to, let's move on."

"It was most definitely not a fluke," Anna said. "It was the same crap I have to deal with day after day. No one wants to hear about your kids, no one cares what your life is like after hours. What matters is being on time and doing good work."

"I do better work than anyone in this group." Jill's voice rose, her bangs shook across her narrow forehead as her entire body trembled. "And I do more work. The deadlines are impossible. I have to hunch over spreadsheets for hours in the middle of the night."

"If you didn't talk all day about nothing, you'd get your work done during business hours," said Anna.

Jill stood and pressed her hands on the table. Her knuckles and tendons gleamed white as her skin pulled tight across the backs of her hands.

Eddie opened the door. "Let's go. We're not accomplishing anything."

"I'm leaving," said Anna. "And when I meet with Carl tomorrow, I'm going to talk to him about this problem. This industry is too competitive for this kind of behavior."

"What problem?" said Jill.

"You." Anna grabbed the handle of her bag to hold it close to her thigh as she turned and marched out the door. In her navy blue suit with squared shoulders, clutching her bag like a sword at her hip, she looked like an officious soldier, headed off to report an act of treason.

Eddie let go of the door and it swung shut after her.

"I hate that woman," said Jill.

"It looks like the feeling's mutual," he muttered. "But you need to work together. Unless you're going to find another job."

"Why should I find another job?" Jill slumped into the chair and folded her arms on the table. She laid her head on her wrists, and her voice came out in a soft moan. "I was hired first and I have more to offer. I'm just not appreciated."

"You do kind of shoot yourself in the foot," said Eddie.

"Now you're turning against me too?"

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"I'm not turning against you. I'm just saying, you need to get along with her. You made her look unprepared in front of Carl." Why couldn't she understand such a simple concept? Eddie shoved his hands in his pockets to make sure they stayed under his control.

"It's not my fault. I told you Jared threw up. All over the bed. It took me over an hour to clean it up. Then I had to get him soda and try to get him back to sleep. And I really shouldn't have even taken him to school. But I knew this meeting was important."

"No one wants to hear about things like that."

"No one understands how hard it is for me. They don't appreciate me. I should just quit."

When Jill threw out these idle threats to quit, it just made things worse. He had to figure out a way to knock some sense into her, to get her to keep her complaints just for his ears. He was happy to listen; the others were not.

At nine forty-five the next morning, Jill breezed past his office, clutching a very large cup of coffee in one hand, laptop and purse slung over her shoulder.

"Hi, Eddie, I'm late. Traffic was unbearable and Justin couldn't find his shoe so he threw the most incredible tantrum in the driveway."

Eddie nodded.

"Gotta go. Eight voice mails, I called from my cell, but didn't think I could remember all eight, so I just hung up."

She disappeared from view and he went back to reading the Web page plastered across the screen in front of him. Why couldn't he concentrate? He was losing his bearings. Until Anna, fresh from MBA school, came along, he knew what his job was. Now she acted like she was his boss, and Carl never objected. He was starting to feel unnecessary at work. And he was certainly unnecessary to his wife. His ex-wife.

Soon Jill was back in the doorway. "Carl wants to see me at ten. It's already five past. Damn. Now I wish I'd listened to all the voice mail in the car, I would have gone directly to his office."

When she returned thirty minutes later, he felt as if the last piece of solid ground gave way. Jill stormed down the hall and threw open the door to her office. He could feel it vibrate through the cardboard-thin walls from one end of the hall to the other. Loud sobbing, approaching a shrieking quality, shattered his ears. He pushed back his chair and stumbled out the door. In three long strides he reached Jill's office and was greeted by a three-inch-thick black binder slamming against the toes of his shoes.

Jill's face was red and glossy like a plum. She grabbed two soft-

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covered computer manuals and threw them on the chair. The force caused the chair to roll a few inches, and the heavy books crashed onto the floor. "I told you no one appreciates me here. I've been let go."

Let go? Could they do that? He thought there were rules, organized processes for eliminating employees. "That can't be right," he said.

"It's right. Isolated cuts, every organization has a percentage. We're ten, and I'm the ten percent."

"Just like that?"

"You've been in this business long enough. You know it's always 'just like that.' But why it's me is totally unfair. Some kind of phony story about being able to get technical expertise from the engineers themselves, they don't need a technical person on the marketing team."

"But you . . ."

"You can be sure Anna had something to do with turning him against me."

"Don't blame Anna. Management makes these decisions, they don't consult with people on our level."

Jill slammed more books onto the chair. This time they stayed in place, but the chair spun slightly. "I don't mean she made the decision. I mean he was out to get me because she's always blaming everything on me."

"I don't think that's fair."

"Whose side are you on?" shouted Jill. "I have no job. Do you get that? My family's income is cut in half. In two months, I won't be able to make my house payment." Painful sounding sobs heaved out of her lungs.

"You'll find something else. You have a severance package. It'll be okay."

"No it won't. I've given this company twelve years of my life. I turned from a young woman into middle age in this company. It won't be *Oh-Kay,* Eddie."

Eddie was frantic to say something that would stop her pain. He couldn't bear to see her crying; it made him feel helpless. "You always say you should quit, that it's too hard juggling everything."

"And give up my career? That's just talk. If I wanted to quit, I would have."

"Then why did you say it all the time?"

"Are you arguing with me? I've been let go and you're arguing with me that I should be happy?!"

"No. I just want to help."

"Then help me pack so I can get out of here."

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Eddie scurried into the office and lifted up one of the flattened cardboard boxes that had miraculously appeared on Jill's office floor while she was meeting with Carl. He constructed the box and began filling it with books.

The office was tight and hot with Jill standing just a few feet away, and he found it difficult to take a complete breath.

"What are you huffing and puffing for?" asked Jill.

"I'm not. I'm just looking for what I should pack next."

She shoved three binders into his hands and he almost stumbled under the weight. "How much are you going to take? You won't really need all this old stuff, will you?"

"It's rightfully mine and I'm taking it. This is all I have to show for twelve years of my life."

"You have your kids. You have your house. Think of all the experience you have. You won't have any trouble finding another job."

"I have nothing." She said it so quietly he almost didn't hear her, and the tone of her voice made him afraid. She didn't want to be comforted or reassured.

He couldn't stay silent, let those ominous words hang in the air like a swarm of locusts ready to descend and gnaw their way through her brain. "You don't mean that."

"Don't keep talking just because you don't know what to say. And don't tell me what I mean. I absolutely mean every word I've ever said in my entire life."

Eddie wanted to laugh. She talked too much to recall every word she'd said. "But you don't mean that you have nothing. You just feel badly about your job, but you'll find another, I know you will."

"Go get the security guard. I'm done here and I want to get out before I kill someone."

Eddie backed out of the office. "Please don't talk like that when the guard's walking you out. He'll take it as a serious threat. Please."

"I don't care."

Eddie almost ran down the hall. He told the guard she was ready to be escorted out of the building. Why did they have to make it so degrading? A guarded escort, as if she might steal something or turn violent.

The guard wheeled his dolly to Jill's office door. She had already removed her name plaque from the slot on the door. Eddie stood with arms limp at his sides while the guard stacked boxes on the dolly. Jill picked up her purse, laptop bag, and her now cold cup of coffee. Then she set it down again and reached to the wall, yanking a glass encased certificate off the wall, tearing out the hook in the process. She dropped the certificate into the trashcan and the glass cracked.

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"Why did you do that?" said Eddie.

"Why do you think? An award for my contribution? I don't think so."

They walked down the hall and around the corner in single file, the dolly leading the way, like a funeral procession, with Jill bringing up the rear.

In the main corridor they passed the executive conference room. Out of habit, he glanced into the conference room as he passed. The room was empty, the blinds closed so it looked almost dark even though the sun was bright outside. The guard was approaching the lobby doors and Eddie quickened his pace to catch up. He wasn't sure why he was walking with them, but it seemed the right thing to do. He couldn't let her go alone.

Suddenly he didn't hear Jill behind him. She was standing at the door of the conference room, her hand on the door frame.

"Come on," said Eddie.

"What's the rush? I really should take that bowl. I'm the one who earned it."

Eddie walked back and touched her shoulder. "It belongs to the company. Besides, you don't want it. Where would you put that monstrosity?"

"I'd throw it in the parking lot and watch it shatter into a thousand pieces. Sort of like my life."

"Please don't, Jill. It's not that bad."

She whirled around and glared at him. "I thought you were my best friend."

"Ms. Madison." The guard glared at Jill, obviously tired of the prolonged exit.

Jill ignored him. Eddie shifted from one foot to the other, shoved his hands in his pockets, then pulled them out. He felt as if his whole body, all his organs, were exposed and raw. He didn't know whether he should urge her forward or let her grieve a few more minutes.

Finally she turned and shuffled toward the lobby doors.

In the weeks after, she called him daily. Sometimes several times a day. He could set his clock by her calls, right after she dropped her kids at school, lunchtime, when he could imagine her seated alone at her twelve-foot dining room table, eating a salad, nothing to occupy her mind. She sometimes called a third time from the soccer field, shouting into her cell phone.

Now their conversations were exclusively about CompuTech. The price of their stock, their new products, political gossip, and most of all, the injustice that had been done to her. Repeatedly she

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reminded him that she'd been key to their most successful product announcement of all time. She outlined her accomplishments, ran through lists and timelines as if it was important he know every detail.

Then her calls took a disturbing track. She no longer recounted history but wanted to brainstorm on how she might get rehired. "You could help me," she said. "It was so unfair, and you saw the whole thing."

What should we do? Her question ran through his mind at night when he couldn't sleep because he drank gallons more caffeine than ever in an effort to stay interested in a job that had become lifeless. How could he help her return? He had no influence over hiring and firing. *What should we do? Are you thinking about it, Eddie?*

It was a Tuesday. Jill's number glittered on the phone display and the ring burbled through his small office. Eddie froze. He rested his fingers on the keys of his computer keyboard. If he didn't answer by the fourth ring, it would go to voice mail. It wasn't that he didn't want to talk to her. He pushed the button to answer the speakerphone, too shaky to clutch the handset.

"Hi," he said. "How are you doing?"

"Things aren't moving forward."

"How's that?"

"I feel like you're putting me off. I want to come over there for lunch. And then we can figure out a way for me to see some people, get them thinking about how much they need me back."

Eddie pressed his fingers on the computer keys, hard. A random series of letters flew across the display. He lifted his hands and pressed them against his thighs where his palms left tiny moist spots on his khaki slacks. "They let you go. They aren't going to talk to you about coming back. At least not this soon." Why did he say that? She would leap on it as a promise of something down the road.

"What's a good day for lunch? I really want to see you. I miss talking to you."

"We talk every day."

"Don't you miss hanging out? Working together? I know you do."

"Yes."

"Then what day? Friday?"

"Sure," muttered Eddie. "That sounds good." It wouldn't be the same. It would never be the same.

He said good-bye after promising twice to think more about Jill's situation. The moment the speaker was off, his door slid open.

"Did I just hear Jill's voice screeching over the phone?" Anna

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stepped a good way into his office so that Eddie felt he had to roll his chair toward the back wall, which wasn't far. Now he felt pinned against it, an insect on a straight pin.

"You're eavesdropping?"

"You can hear everything through these walls. Why are you talking to her? If others hear, it will hurt your reputation."

"No it won't."

"It's the odor of death, you know. The stink that wafts off the people who are dismissed and attaches itself to those who can't let go."

"Don't be so dramatic."

"What did she want?"

Eddie felt the walls were closer than before, thicker somehow. Tan metal shelves overhead and against the wall, too many shelves, filled with the history of his job, books and binders he never looked at. His breathing felt heavy. All he'd done was try to be a friend, and it seemed that he was being punished for the effort.

"We're just going to lunch."

"Not here, I hope."

"Yes, here. She's coming by on Friday. Do you have something specific you want to talk about? Because if you're just here to issue some warning about how I better stay away from her, you're wasting your time."

Anna leaned against the door frame. Her thin body draped in a four-hundred-dollar suit that looked as elegant as an evening gown. He didn't understand why she was so determined to manage his career, making sure he associated with the right people. He didn't really care. It wasn't as if he had a chance to move up the corporate ladder like Anna did, eyeing a VP slot.

"She calls the rest of us too. It's not like you're someone special. The difference is that we don't pick up the phone."

"I consider Jill a friend, and I'm not going to cut her off because she was let go."

"I'm just trying to look out for you, Eddie."

"Go look out for someone else. I have work to do."

She shrugged, the fabric of her suit moving gracefully over her body as she turned to leave. "You might think I'm being cold, but you'll regret not taking my advice."

"I don't think so." When she left, he stood and closed the door. Hard. It was funny, he felt Jill was a burden, clinging to him, pulling him under the water with her. But after listening to Anna, his feelings raced in the opposite direction, full of compassion, or sadness—he couldn't be sure what, exactly. He wasn't going to turn his back on Jill just because her life got a little bit rocky. She needed him more than ever.

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He felt infused with a burst of energy he hadn't felt in weeks. He straightened his desk, putting papers into the shredding bin, tossing away used coffee cups and old napkins. Maybe there was a way to help Jill come back. He should be more of a fighter; it didn't seem to hurt Anna at all, walking around spouting her opinions.

When he saw Jill on Friday she was sunk deep in a soft, backless chair in the lobby waiting for him. The chair made her body seem shrunken, and her face was pale, more lined, and her eyelids heavier than he remembered. She stood with a great deal of effort and he saw that she was thinner. Her arms looked bony at the elbow.

"It's insulting having to walk in here and get a visitor's badge like I'm some kind of enemy of the company's intellectual property. I should have suggested we meet outside for lunch."

"But then you wouldn't get to see people, say hello."

"That's a good point. Have you set up anything specific for me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Meetings with any managers? I know it wouldn't be Carl, but some of the others."

"You know I can't do that." They hadn't even crossed the lobby and he felt the newly familiar crushing sensation on his chest. He couldn't help her. He was useless. What she wanted was too much, it was outside his range of influence.

"But you just said if we went out I wouldn't see people."

"I meant casually." He waved his badge in front of the card reader, waited for it to unlock the door, then grabbed the door and held it open for her.

They walked through the building to the outside courtyard. Jill talked the entire time as they walked through the cafeteria and on their way to hunting down a table. She talked about the people they saw, not bothering to lower her voice. "That guy is useless. I asked him to research a market segment for me once and all he sent me was three Internet links to news articles." She pointed at someone else. "Did I ever tell you about the time he actually removed my name from a presentation and replaced it with his own? The document ended up making its way back to me two weeks later, when some VP sent an e-mail praising the quality."

Every bite of food Eddie put in his mouth felt like a lead pellet hitting his gut. The pressure built until he couldn't finish his small salad. He pushed it away.

"If you don't want that, I'll eat it." Jill pulled it toward her and started crunching lettuce, which made him feel worse, the sound of her chewing magnified in his ears. She stared at him with hard, glittering eyes. "What's the matter with you? Why aren't you eating?"

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"I'm not hungry."

"Good. Then you can devote your attention to the plan. Are you going to walk me around the building to chat in people's offices?"

"No. I think that was a bad idea. I don't know why I suggested it."

"Because you're my friend. You're trying to help me."

Her friend? Is this what friendship ultimately turned into? A one-hundred-ten pound dead weight around his ankle? A request to humiliate himself in a futile effort to reconnect her with former coworkers and managers? "Can't I help you by being a reference somewhere else? Why do you even want to come back here?"

"Because it's my home."

"That sounds morbid."

"I built my career here. In spite of all its flaws, I love it. I believe in the products, I care about the people—most of them."

"All you've done since you got here is complain about the people."

"You know what I mean." She reached across the table and wrapped her thin fingers around his wrist. She clenched it so tight he thought she was closing off the circulation. Did he imagine that his fingertips were getting a bluish tint?

He pried her fingers off his wrist and rubbed where the pressure had left actual marks. "Don't grab me like that."

"You're such a whiner sometimes. I don't understand why you still work here and I don't."

Eddie stood and gathered up the trash from their lunch. "Let's go. I need to get back to work."

"What about your plan?"

"I don't have a plan. I have to do my job and I can't help you."

Jill remained in her chair. She folded her arms and leaned her forearms on the table, pinning her unused knife in place.

Eddie tried to loosen the knife blade from under her arm, but his hands were damp with sweat and he couldn't get a grip. "Let me have that."

Even though he wasn't supposed to leave her alone without an escort, Eddie no longer cared. He picked up what he could from the table, left the knife under the bone of her forearm, and walked toward the disposal area.

"Come back here," she yelped. "You said you'd help me."

He felt that every table he passed grew silent, the employees looking at him, waiting to see if he would return to the woman yelling at him, wondering if she would follow him, hoping there would be a drama.

Suddenly he heard her feet slapping the linoleum behind him. "Why did you walk away from me? Everyone lets me down, everyone walks away."

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He sighed. "You chase them away."

"I don't. Please don't say such cold things. I can't chase you away, you're my friend. Right? Eddie?"

"I need to get back to work."

"You're scaring me. Slow down. Are you still going to help me find a job? Are you going to give me a good reference? Promise me you'll still think about ways for me to come back here to work."

"I can't promise anything."

"Then you'll call me? Tell me what you thought of?"

He kept walking. He crossed the courtyard and entered the building again, barely holding the door open long enough for her to pass over the threshold before letting it fall closed behind her. He hurried down the long hall, past the conference room.

"Wait. Let me stop here just for a minute."

"What's the point?"

"I just want to look, remember old times."

"No."

Despite the volume of his voice, she turned into the dark conference room and disappeared from sight. He had no choice but to follow her.

Jill was already at the other side of the room, fingering the stones in the center of the glass bowl.

"We need to go."

She picked up a fistful of stones and held them to her cheek. "They're so cold. Like ice cubes."

He walked around the table. He felt like grabbing her arm and dragging her all the way to the lobby and out to the curb.

She let the stones fall out of her hand into the bowl, where they clanged so loudly against the sides he was afraid they would chip the glass. Then she picked up the bowl and moved it slowly, letting the stones slide around the glass, spinning like drops of dark water splashing inside.

Eddie came up behind her. "Please put it down. You should leave before someone comes in for a meeting."

"Don't treat me like some unstable lunatic who's going to break your precious glass bowl." She moved it harder, and the stones slithered up closer to the edge.

He reached for the bowl. Several stones, gathering momentum, flew up and over the sides and onto the carpeted floor. Eddie bent to pick them up.

"I'll get them," said Jill. "You're not my slave. Hold this." She shoved the heavy bowl into his handswhich were damp from the extended, tension-filled hour, wet with fear and exhaustion.

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Almost useless hands. He felt the bowl slide in his fingers and stepped to press his hip against the table to stabilize himself.

Jill knelt on the floor, picking up stones.

"What is she doing here?" Anna's voice from the doorway of the conference room was sharp and loud. "It's against company policy to have former employees wandering around the building."

Eddie turned too fast, caught his foot on the leg of one of the rolling chairs, and felt his fingers lose their tentative hold on the glass. The enormous bowl slid from his hands like water, landing on the back of Jill's head with a sickening thud.

She didn't make a sound. Her body collapsed to the floor. Her fingers, still curled around black and amber polished stones, opened slightly.

"Oh, Eddie. What did you do?" whispered Anna. Without making a sound, she was suddenly right behind him.

He squatted next to Jill and shook her shoulder gently. She didn't move or cry out. For once, her lips were silent. The flow staunched.

"She doesn't look right. Do you think she's knocked out?"

"Obviously. Or she'd say something. Or open her eyes. Something."

He shook her again, harder, roughly. Angry now. How dare she become such a burden, needing too much from him.

"Do you . . . do you think she's dead?" said Anna.

"No. She can't be."

"That bowl is heavy."

"I know that! She's not dead." He put his face close to hers, tried to feel her breath on his skin. His heart beat faster, he didn't know what to do.

Gently moving her head, although he knew he shouldn't, he pressed his fingers into the side of her neck, trying to find the wild, angry pulse that was always beating there.

"She's dead," Anna said, backing away. "It wasn't your fault. I can see that. Everyone will see that. You invited her for lunch, and you shouldn't have, and you let her wander around where she didn't belong. But it was an accident. You didn't mean to kill her."

"No," he said. "I didn't mean to." His legs felt like rubber. He pulled out one of the chairs and sat down. Eddie closed his eyes. Of course he hadn't meant to kill her.

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DYING WORDS

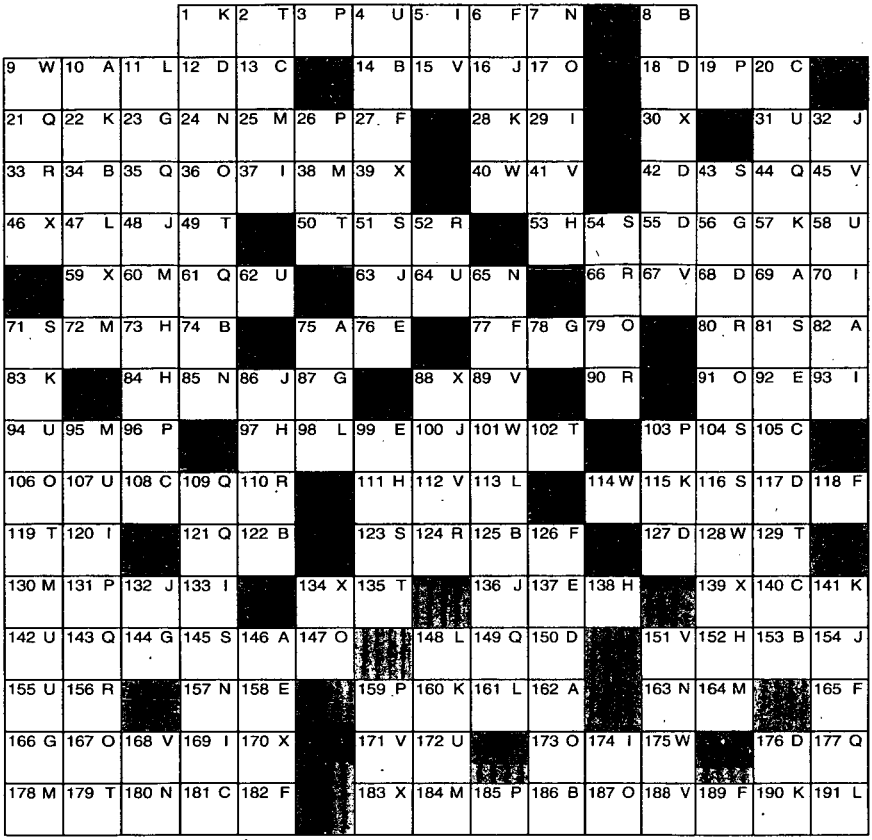
ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 45.
The solution to the puzzle will appear in the May issue.

DEFINITIONS	WORDS
A. Low	69 162 146 75 10 82
B. A supplement	153 74 8 34 122 186 14 125
C. Clauses	181 108 105 20 13 140
D. Near	55 68 176 12 42 117 127 18 150
E. Boundaries	99 137 76 92 158
F. Sana citizen	27 6 165 126 118 189 77 182
G. 1969 name in the news	87 23 56 166 144 78
H. Cabal's forte	138 53 111 73 84 152
I. Hardly placates	133 37 5 93 70 29 174 169 120
J. Axed	63 48 86 100 32 132 136 16 154
K. Made a temporary visit	141 28 1 190 115 160 22 57 83
L. Entices	47 191 11 98 148 161 113
M. Supporter of mob rule	164 38 60 130 25 178 184 95 72
N. Computer-memory unit	97 157 24 85 180 7 163 65
O. Goulash kin: 2 wds.	187 167 36 17 173 91 147 79 106
P. Dismiss, in a way: 2 wds.	96 103 185 26 19 131 3 159

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Q. Eastern canine: 2 wds.

109	149	21	44	61	177	35	143	121

R. Baked Alaska need: 2 wds.

124	80	52	66	156	110	90	33

S. Connecticut, etc. (with "the")

104	81	54	71	51	43	145	116	123

T. Give rise to

119	2	135	49	102	179	50	129

U. Least profligate

62	107	64	94	4	31	142	155	58	172

V. Country that became independent in 1960: 2 wds.

112	168	67	151	89	45	41	171	15	188

W. Verse rhythms

114	9	40	101	128	175

X. "Say more"

183	170	30	88	134	46	139	59	39

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THE LAGOON

EVE FISHER

Here's a couple of ways to get some idea of what T. J.—Theodore James Olson—was like. There was the time I saw him and his wife, Irma, coming into Mellette's Lounge for dinner. Actually, I should say waddling, since they were both as fat as Christmas turkeys. The Lounge phone rang as they passed the register, and T. J. growled, "It's another damn call for you. Why don't I have a gun when I need one?" The other way is to imagine a bull walrus without the personality.

T. J. had never been pleasant. But in a small town like Laskin, pleasant isn't necessarily required. Since we're almost all Norwegian Lutherans, we're trained from childhood to be polite to everyone and to never let them know how despicable you really find them. The upside to this is that most people behave in a courteous, friendly manner. The downside, besides the fact that you never really know what your neighbor thinks of you, is that unpleasant people never get their comeuppance. You just live with them, like a permanent hangover. An unscrupulous person can get away with just about anything.

Not that T. J. was unscrupulous. He had scruples, he was very good at business, and he had the brains, bossiness, and bullheadedness to take charge of anything he was involved with. He was on almost every board in town, and ran them. Newcomers quickly found themselves facing a man who would lower his square head, let his jowls hang down, and explain to them exactly what they were going to do (not much), say (even less), and vote (his way). He got things done.

But T. J. finally got his comeuppance when he ran for mayor. He naturally assumed that since he ran everything in town anyway, he might as well run the town itself. His campaign slogan was "The Best for the Job, the Best for Laskin." He had posters up everywhere, ads every Monday, and made it clear to all that he expected your vote. He didn't get it. Instead, we elected Sam Johnson, who wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer and was well liked because of it.

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To say that T. J. was irate was like saying a grizzly sow is unappreciative of your attempts to pet her young cub. He didn't speak to anyone outside of work for maybe a week, and his employees—he ran the local lumberyard—had to have wondered why God had picked them for punishment duty. He was so unpleasant that Irma took off to visit her sister in Texas—"good for her," was the general consensus—which, in turn, cheered T. J. up so much he was back to his old self in no time, unpleasant but normal. There was an assumption he'd learned his lesson.

It was shortly thereafter that T. J. announced his decision to raise hogs on some land he'd bought out by Lake Howard back when he and Irma had first gotten married. They said they were going to build a big house on it when T. J. got rich, but since his idea of rich would have required more income than Donald Trump's, that never happened. Instead, they parked an old trailer on it and spent a couple of weeks every summer there. By day T. J. fished and Irma read paperback romances, by night they fought, and that was that. All in all, it was a financial drain, especially as land taxes went up. Or at least, that was the excuse T. J. used. Plus, he said, he'd always wanted to have his own hogs. Comments were made regarding the probability of kinship.

Now if T. J. had just wanted to put a couple of hogs out there, nobody would have said anything. But T. J. put in an application for a permit for a hog containment unit. That meant a minimum of a thousand hogs, complete with noise and stink. Lake Howard is only a mile or two outside of Laskin, and there were houses within two hundred yards of T. J.'s property. It was pretty obvious that T. J. had figured out how to punish Laskin for rejecting him as mayor. But T. J. never had figured out that he lived in a democracy. A petition began circulating against T. J.'s operation, and everyone signed it. T. J. arranged his jowls and went to the county commission. So did everyone else, and T. J.'s application was refused.

If you think that stopped him, you didn't know T. J. He took the county commission to court, saying they had no right to refuse his application just because the neighbors objected. He had the right to have hogs, and there was nothing in the laws or bylaws of the county against such an operation. The hearing was quick and dead against him. So he sued the county. And he started running ads, calling for all lovers of liberty to join him in a fight against despotic government. We thought it was mighty fancy language for someone who said he just wanted to raise hogs.

We also thought that T. J. had gone too far. You can be a private nuisance to everybody and their brother up here, but you don't

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sue the government. Not because the government's always right or anything like that, but because you don't want to cause trouble. It's an unwritten law. So we watched in mounting horror as T. J., after losing his lawsuit against the county, filed suit in district court, and lost, and then moved on to the state court.

It was at this point that we all started wondering what was really going on with our T. J. "Why's he so dead-set on them hogs?" John Davison asked at the Norseman's Bar one night, and no one could answer him. After all, lawsuits cost money, and T. J. was still watching two fuzzy channels via antenna rather than pay for basic cable. And who was paying for all those ads? Some people thought it was one of those militia-freemen organizations that was backing him, although why they'd be interested in a hog containment unit no one knew. Others thought it was one of the big national hog operations, looking for a way into our county. Either way, they were in for a surprise. We'd put up with T. J. all our lives, but we were all genuinely against the hog containment operation for a number of reasons, but mainly because of the lagoons.

T. J. had explained, at some length, that the lagoons were structurally sound systems for the aeration of hog wastes, which would be transformed into liquid fertilizer, ideal for agricultural production of the area. "A hundred thousand gallons of pure stink," was the general response. Nor did it help when word got out that T. J. had already dug the lagoon and started building the hog pens. All he was waiting for was the hogs. The arrogance of it was the last straw. Not only would no one support him, but now no one would talk to him. A lot of people started buying lumber over in Herman or even Sioux Falls. And he wouldn't give up, even when he lost in state court. Instead, he took it to the state supreme court.

The state supreme court heard T. J.'s case on a grim, rainy day in April. We were all worried sick. What if T. J. won on a technicality? What if it rained too much and the creek flooded again, the way it had back in '93? What if T. J. won, and there were hogs and lagoons and it rained and *that* flooded? The stress mounted high, until John Davison and his brothers, who had the dynamite, the time, and the criminal minds, decided the only thing to do was to go out and blow up T. J.'s lagoon and hog barns, which would, as John later explained, "at least slow the son of a bitch down some."

The explosion was heard all the way in Laskin. Back at T. J.'s, the hog pens blasted into a cloud of sticks, mud, brown mist, and noise that John described later as mighty satisfying. Then it rained splinters, spars, mud, brown rain, and nails in a wide enough radius that the boys nearly got killed. A lot of it hit the lagoon, where it

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smacked down and bounced back up almost like a rubber ball, only to fall back down again.

When everything had settled down, the boys raced over to get a look at the damage. And nearly died of heart failure. Bobbing in the muddy brown water of the lagoon was a body. A woman's body. For the first time in their lives, the Davison boys called the police, and, for once, the police didn't arrest them. They arrested T. J. in Pierre. Brought him back to Laskin in handcuffs.

We never did find out why T. J. killed Irma. He pleaded temporary insanity, clamped his lower lip tight under his jowls, and refused to say another word. He's sitting on death row right now, still clammed up.

But as John Davison pointed out one night at the Norseman's, at least now we knew what T. J. was after. Not the hogs but the lagoon. The perfect place—smell and all—to hide what was left of his wife. The more we thought about it, the creepier it got. People started shifting their feet, rubbing their jaws, sneaking looks around. "Not that anybody else'd ever try something that dumb," John said hastily, and everybody nodded.

But the next day a new petition started floating around Laskin, banning hog containments in the county, and everybody signed it. It was a polite way of keeping temptation away from the folks that couldn't handle it. They might not know who they are, but we do.

Solution to the March UNSOLVED

Red-haired Helene Dawes poisoned her sadistic ex-husband with the flan.

ENTRY	NAME	STATE	HAIR	DESSERT
1	Laura Elgar	SC	brunette	devil's food cake
2	Janice Bakay	OH	blonde	German chocolate cake
3	Maria Gordi	TN	brunette	brownies
4	Kathy Anson	VA	blonde	chiffon cake
5	Helene Dawes	UT	red	flan
6	Nadine Folger	PA	brunette	apple strudel
7	Idella Carson	RI	red	eclairs

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8 ACROSS

LEIGH LUNDIN

The Great Valley slices through Mexico's axis at a "depth" of 7,500 feet above sea level, a half mile higher than Denver, the Mile High City, which rises less than 5,300 feet. From the basin floor, mountains climb to a height exceeding three and a half miles, and along these mountainsides lie villages as ancient as any habitations in the Americas.

These settlements suffer a peculiar absence of men. Capable males beyond puberty brave the dangerous, sometimes deadly *Norte-américano* trek and slip into the United States seeking work to feed families at home.

Rural folk in the hamlet of Malauva found it odd, therefore, when a party of men gathered up the mountain in a Toltec ruin jutting from a promontory like a prehistoric fortification. The eight kept to themselves, buying only cooked mutton, pigeon, vegetables, and bread from young Tortola, a boy who lived down the hillside where maize plots abutted the rocky cliffs.

In the village below, the womenfolk surmised such men must be military or perhaps secret police, since the newcomers shunned outsiders and tequila, although Tortola reported the leader's accent was unlike anything he'd ever heard. Work, however, was too hard and the ground too stony for idle speculation.

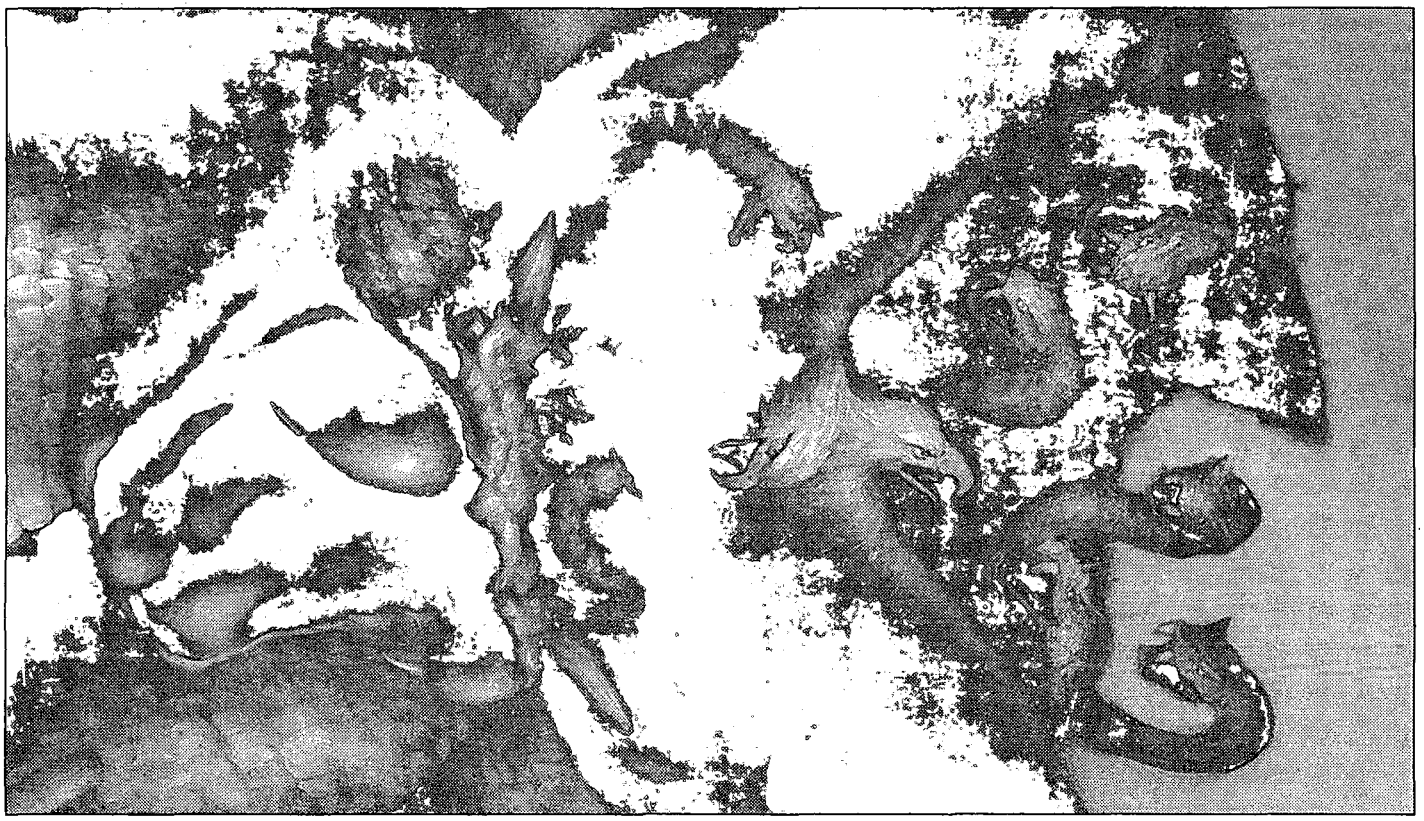
That February, *policia* brought word to the village that Juanita Sanchez's boy had died crossing the Chihuahua desert. Villagers accepted the news with resignation and shared fermented coffee with the police. Before praying for their dead and returning to work, the villagers passingly mentioned the band of men up the mountainside. Curious, the police turned their Jeep up the slope for a visit.

Late that night, the Jeep ground through the village, briefly waking Tortola. The following morning when he hoofed tortillas and eggs up to the ruins, he found it deserted, everything except the stone altar.

Tortola located the two policemen, a horror that would forever haunt the devout boy. They had been stripped to their underwear,

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their hands bound behind their backs. Strangled by the gold chains around their necks, they had been garroted with force until the crushed crucifixes glinted through the gore.

Meanwhile, the eight had disappeared.

SAXICOLOUS.

Unmoving, José blended perfectly with the desert, chameleoned among the rocks in their muted tans and baked reds and deep lines of erosion, the only movement the last of the heat shimmers still rising from the earth.

An itch annoyed him, but only momentarily.

Saxicolous, ten letters—the word headed the puzzle his crossword editor wife had drawn up about him—*Growing or living among the rocks.* One down . . . Straight-arrow. Well, he tried. Nineteen across from the D in Moody . . . Dauntless. José liked that one a lot.

His gift of immobile posing, José liked to imagine, descended from his ancient Aztec ancestry. No evidence suggested pre-Columbian Indians ever embraced the impassive stereotype of North American natives—far from it—but it amused him to think so.

Piercing the Texas dusk, José stared toward the south. He squatted, conscious of the pops and unpleasant strain in his knees. As he closed in on forty, it was only going to get worse. He glanced up the *arroyo* at Miller, who in turn flicked a glimpse back to him, sharing their *compañerismo*—their camaraderie and the fine sense of reading each other's minds.

He was grateful for Miller's presence, both as friend and deputy. Some cops would have misgivings reporting to a sheriff who was, as a Tex redneck once put it, "half Injun, half Mex, half gringo."

These days, he was doubly obliged to Miller. José's wife complained that at the best of times he rarely found evenings to take her dancing, and now, prior to the elections, he was downright morose, worried that on the turn of a vote he would not be able to provide for his family.

He saw the coal of Miller's cigarette brighten. Personally, José detested smoking. He preferred the smoke of campfires, the embers of a setting sun, the arid breath of the land.

He gazed westward through the distant Chihuahua wasteland. The dying sun painted skies in strokes of deep purples and reds, rays of gold and subtle blue, colors that city decorators labeled "desert hues," managing to look simultaneously rich and stark. An ironic name, considering pollution vapors of distant factories

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and far cities pigmented the palette with so many of those shades and pastels.

Creatures began to rustle amidst the mesquite: rattlesnakes, whiptails, venomous vinegarroons, and beaded lizards—some early to bed, others early to rise. The nocturnal changing of the guard. Moments later, Miller gave a low whistle, and José saw that other creatures were afoot.

He unhooked his flashlight but kept it off. He didn't expect trouble, but he unsnapped the leather strap that covered the hammer of his old-fashioned Colt. It wasn't that he didn't believe in modern side arms. During the workday he normally carried an automatic, and bolted in his Jeep was a floor-mounted boot for the Vietnam era M-14s req'd from the federal government.

On their own time, however, out in the desert after working hours, he and Miller found it easy to ignore the modern world, and a six-gun in an oiled leather holster felt right. Their favorite time, they garaged the Jeep, saddled horses, slung Winchester lever-actions behind their saddles, and buckled on walnut-grip revolvers, the stuff of Western legends. Or maybe—just as his wife had suggested—maybe they were still little boys playing cowboys and Indians.

And Mexicans.

Yet another of those nights. Illegals came straggling in the usual ragged line from the border, packing so many liters of life-preserving water they could carry little else.

The first trekker he recognized, and she wasn't illegal at all. Maria Luz Lopez, whom *gringa* friends had nicknamed Molly, was a legal resident with family on both sides of the border. She beamed a wide, bright smile that appeared to glow in the dusk.

José tipped his hat, a gesture he was completely unconscious of. *"Buenos tardes,* Molly," he said as she neared.

She veered from the path to edge closer to him.

Molly took happy advantage of the CBP/ICE mind-set; they were geared to prove negatives, to prove that artful dodging Hispanics weren't U.S. residents. When she wanted to visit Mexico, she "accidentally misplaced" her green card and shortly a mysterious phone call anonymously reported her. After lunch and transportation courtesy of U.S. and Mexican governments, Molly visited her relatives to the south. Days later, she'd make the return trip under cover of darkness, carrying her newly found green card just in case she was challenged. José suspected she did the routine as much for the adventure as for the few dollars she saved.

Molly stopped and took José's hand. Aloud she said, *"Buenos*

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tardes, Señor," and then sotto voce she warned, "Trouble coming, *Capitán."*

Before José could say anything, she was gone.

Others trudged behind Molly: the maids, the deferential gardeners, the house servants and the fruit pickers, the resourceful automobile mechanics and talented cooks—all of them cogs and roller bearings in the wheels of two national economies. This night, from Texas through California, workers were making the risky journey, most like Molly settling in the Southwest, but many welcomed in distant northern states like Minnesota and Ohio. Miller had sworn he'd eaten the best Mexican quesadillas ever in a burg off an Indiana interstate.

A family of four passed. José nodded at a middle-aged couple carrying a baby, possibly a grandchild. José eyeballed their water, making sure they had enough to travel. Without sufficient liquids to flood the waterways of the brain, gray matter shriveled and died. Without water, as the heat sucked the moisture from the cortex, it was not uncommon for the afflicted to wander aimlessly, hallucinate, pull off their shoes in a strange reaction no one understood, finally collapse and die.

A pause, a gap in the stream.

Thirty-four across . . . Patient.

Miller whistled another bird warble, and José became alert, peering south into the gulch's closing darkness.

José saw himself as refusing to play the wetback political game, although Miller insisted they'd simply made up their own rules as off-duty peacekeepers. In their eyes, their unofficial role was to see the birds migrating safely through the starkness of their county, to defend them against predation, to protect landowners, and to keep an eye on vigilantes.

Hard drugs were a different matter, so when they suspected narcotics, their department notified the DEA even before the Customs and Border Protection. Or put politically, such calls to ICE were accompanied by notifications to the DEA.

Thus when eight men trudged over the rise, he and Miller narrowed the gap between them without seeming to protect each other. Miller backed a little closer yet, lit another cigarette, and began to idly chat across the distance. "D'you watch that exhibition game last night? Man, I always look forward to March Madness. Ya know, I think Wiley will take their division this year."

José figured Miller lit the cigarette as little more than a prop. "Marlboro Man died, amigo. Cancer, you know."

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The oncoming men slowed, but seemed to take in that others had passed harmlessly before them, and a couple of them turned and saw more people continuing to plod forward, undeterred by Miller and José's presence.

Miller continued. "Most folks follow UT Austin, but I'm putting ten bucks on Wiley. Course, the smart money's on Indiana, Kentucky, some of those insane NCAA schools that seem to lock the Final Four. But take Notre Dame and Western . . ." Miller glanced offhandedly at the men. *"Buenos tardes, amigos."*

One moved a little in front of the others. *"Buenos tardes."*

"Es un anochecer hermosa," said Miller of the beautiful evening, pushing the limits of his rudimentary Spanish.

"Please speak English," said the same man, white teeth flashing under a trim black mustache. "I tell my brothers we use only our new language now. Please." The others behind him nodded.

"It's not like English is all you're going to hear," said Miller, offering his cigarette pack. "Your first time? You boys okay on directions? Got enough water?"

"We are okay. Only did not expect to find anyone on the way."

"Just our way of keeping the peace. Y'all have a safe journey, now. *Vaya con Dios."*

José nodded thoughtfully at them, too, and said, *"Vaya con Christos."*

The leader frowned. "Peace be upon him," he said, walking on. The others, impassive, followed.

José turned ninety-one degrees from the departing men, and Miller did the same, their peripheral vision keeping them in sight. "So anyway, Miller, about your March Madness . . . How about those El Paso boys? What about their seasonal scoring? And UTEP's rebounds?"

They let a moment pass before Miller said quietly, "Whew. What you theenk, *Ceeesco."*

"Like you. Something not right, Pancho."

"You notice their *mochilas?* Fancy rucksacks new and all alike? And identical tennies? Almost military, yet not. Not *matóns*—not thugs exactly, but someway dangerous, disciplined, I guess. You notice how we couldn't see all their hands at once? You think they're some kind of undercover DEA squad? Or Columbia mafia?"

"They're not Hispanic, my friend, not even close."

José waved Miller away from the radio and said, "Let's call this in on a landline, keep it off the air."

They watched as the eight neared the top of the northern *barranca.* Miller lit another cigarette, his lighter flaring. He sucked

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one long drag before sticking it filter down into the sand, a pinpoint glow in the dark—a spot for a watching eye to focus upon—and the two faded back to their horses nosing in the scrub.

José snatched his reins off the ground and swung up into the saddle. "Hurry. I've got a feeling about this, partner, a bad one."

José phoned the Border Patrol first, filling them in as to the band's probable route. He put down the receiver and tapped his fingers a few moments prior to making the call to the DEA. Instead, José picked up the phone and called Homeland Security. FBI field agents were great, but their damned bureaucracy "Hoovered"—that is to say, it sucked. Still, if what he suspected was even close to accurate, they were the ones to contact.

By eight the next morning José was dunking a homemade *porra* in coffee as he pored over the agenda for the morrow's Texas Independence Day celebration when the FBI phoned.

"Nice call, Sheriff. We picked up three Saudis, a Moroccan, and two Pakistanis. Each carried a fun-time backpack, fully loaded with explosive. Can't go into details now, but things aren't quite what they seem."

"You nailed six? We encountered two additional."

"Right. The leader, a fellow named Samir Saiid, is still on the loose, him and an Iranian student. Look, gotta go. Rangers are getting a composite made up of Saiid."

José turned back to the schedule for next day's March second celebration. He was interrupted this time by the incoming commotion of deputies hauling in two couples, the four arrested following a coed peeing exhibition in the Long Branch parking lot—he glanced at his watch—at ten o'clock in the morning. That left four fewer drunken celebrants on the streets.

Coming off her shift, Deputy Sheila Parks dragged in two additional habitués from the bar, one with a devil of a bruise across his temple. Deputy Parks held up one of the bar's beer-pull handles sealed in a Bonnie Bag. She winked at José and said, "He got a tap on the head."

José made a show of groaning at the pun, but privately smiled before turning back to hammering out the final tuning of tomorrow's shift schedule. He made a mental note to add positive attitude points on Park's upcoming evaluation.

At noon, Miller sauntered in and plunked a newspaper open on José's desk. "You see this? Abe Abler announcing candidacy for sheriff tomorrow? He's throwing a rally after the parade in the morning. Then tomorrow night, Abe's sponsoring a barbecue *slash* square dance *slash* political rally. Heartwarming, huh."

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"*Our* Abe Abler? Abe Abler Auto Emporium?"

"Yup, on TV with his big chi-chi blonde and that whiny little dog, toy six-shooters and all. What a guy." Miller resumed reading. "Says here he's 'going to clean up incipient crime and corruption within the sheriff's department.' I reckon a used car dealer's got t' have first-hand corruption knowledge. The man's giving a TV and radio interview this afternoon in prep for his big speech tomorrow."

"He sure can do a nice spin with those chrome pistols. Wish we could pinwheel six-guns like that."

"Yeah, boss, but ours gotta carry bullets."

The phone yodeled and José snatched it up. After a moment he held his hand over the receiver and mouthed to Miller, "Homeland Security."

Into the phone he said, "Really? Congratulations, that's seven of 'em. . . . How'd they figure that? . . . Do you believe them? . . . I see. San Antonio? . . . Me? I'm just a small sheriff with a big county. Of course . . . Okay. Sure. Yeah, yeah, I'll be a character witness at *your* divorce too."

He hung up and turned to Miller. "Amigo, grab the Jeep. I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we don't have to suffer through Abe Abler's nomination speech tomorrow. The bad news is we've been invited to the Independence Day celebration at the Alamo."

"Really? Why's that bad news?"

"We might get ourselves blown up."

Once Miller had locked the Jeep's cruise control in at ninety, José spoke. "Here's the score. Those eight last night were not-so-friendly Middle Easterners who sneaked across the border. And their *mochilas*? Full of Semtex. The FBI, Border Patrol, and Rangers caught seven of them, but their leader's still loose."

"Figures."

"This gets weirder, *muchacho*. According to the FBI, most of them simply wanted passage to live in the U.S. When a couple of the men questioned what was in the backpacks, they were told they were smuggling antiquities to finance the trip. Thus, they didn't know for sure because they were under orders not to open them."

"You're kidding. How was that supposed to work?"

"The number two man was to leave a suitcase aboard the DFW shuttle, so he had to be in the know. The other *hombres* were to be put aboard buses and sent on their way. They were told not to open the rucksacks, that someone would collect the

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bags at their destination. To discourage opening them, the leader said that would activate a security alarm, which we found was really a trigger. Thus, you load a bus with holiday travelers and a naïve Middle Eastern boy with a heavy *mochila*, and *boom!*"

Miller swerved to avoid an armadillo intent upon suicide. "And the Alamo?"

"This Saiid, he likes to hit symbolic targets, and if someone bombed the Alamo, hell, Texas by itself would declare war. According to their number two man, his leader's mission was to hit the Alamo. However, he's somewhat handicapped since he's carrying only half the intended explosive."

"Define half, boss."

"Not enough for a car bomb, but they figure he's got enough for a couple of hefty attacks. Remember, just half a kilogram of Semtex—maybe sixteen or seventeen ounces—over Lockerbie, Scotland, brought down that Pan Am 103."

"So they reckon he can't flatten the old mission, but he can still maim and kill a few hundred people while blasting a hell of a hole in it?"

"That's about the size of it."

They rode in silence, contemplating.

"Ya know," said Miller, reaching toward knobs on the radio, "we might as well listen in on Abe's little speech. If he's elected, ya think his body shop will finally repair the vehicles the department sent over?"

José knuckled his hand away. "I'll tune. You drive. I wonder if he's wearing those glitzy six-shooters."

"Most of you know me as a TV celebrity, and you remember my faithful dog Buster. Speak, Buster."

"Mrrrwoufff!"

"And my darling, purty little Mimi. Speak, Mimi."

"Hiya." The snap of her gum was clearly audible over the radio.

"Now I ain't got nuthin' against having a Mex deputy, s'long as they knows their place, but I ask if you noticed the crime and corruption that's been littering these here streets? Have you noticed our sheriff cain't keep up with the boozin' and prostitution and gambling that's become rife in our once purty little town?"

"Kind of ironic, José, considering he's a prime violator."

"My friends know I'm just a good ol' boy, so I gotta ax you: Whut kind of qualifications do a Mex sheriff got that a good ol' American ain't?"

"Like a degree in criminology?" said José under his breath.

Miller said, "I always thought if you was born here, you was

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American. Didn't have nothin' to do with heritage."

"Turn it off, my friend. We've got serious things to be thinking about."

"Gentlemen, lis'en up, please. I'm Special Agent Macy. This is Agent Karp. And there," nodding toward a tall figure with arms folded, leaning against a wall, "is Captain Samuel Lewison of the Texas Rangers."

The two FBI agents offered handshakes, but Lewison kept his arms folded. When Miller stuck his hand out until it couldn't be ignored, Lewison looked at it for a moment as if Miller had offered him tobacco chaw picked off the floor. Reluctantly, he gave Miller's hand a testy grip. José he ignored altogether.

"We're getting a lot of support from Chihuahua County. Sheriff, you and your deputy are here because you two have actually seen and spoken with the suspect. The situation is this: Five of the seven men we picked up are cooperating willingly. Nothing like learning their leader intended to Texas barbecue them with busloads of citizens. Altogether, they agree Saiid was very interested in the Alamo, had photographed it, and was planning to visit it for sure." He tapped the Alamo complex on a Chamber of Commerce map.

"We're pairing each of the cooperating detainees with a brace of Rangers mostly around the River Walk and the Alamo. We've also allocated for a spotter and a shooter, not that I think for a minute that an oversized Remington is going to solve this problem. You gentleman are just two more pairs of eyes."

"Have you learned anything else?"

"We know Saiid has a safe house here, but we don't know where. We're keeping an eye on car and truck rental agencies, but we suspect he doesn't have nearly enough material for a substantial car bomb, let alone a truck bomb. We calculate that his most lethal option will be IEDs in crowded places."

"That being?" interrupted Miller.

"Sorry: improvised explosive device." He halted at Miller's blank look. "You know, like a pipe bomb."

"Oh."

Lewison, again leaning against the wall with arms folded, rolled his eyes at Miller's evident ignorance.

"Thing is, Semtex doesn't need containment packaging like, say, black powder does, but we don't have a peg on Saiid's training or know the parameters of his resources. He could be putting together any damn thing any way he sees fit."

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"What else don't we know?"

"Homeland experts don't expect he'll go suicide unless he's backed into a corner. He's got an awfully huge ego and wants to continue to make a name for himself, not go out with a pizzle."

José nodded. "So we rest tonight and mount up tomorrow? You point us to a good place for dinner?"

Lewison disdainfully undraped his large frame from the wall. "I suppose you boys be wantin' Mex."

Miller stepped forward, unintimidated. "What *is* your problem?"

José put a restraining hand on Miller's sleeve. "Frankly, I was hoping for good sushi and tempura. We don't get much of that down our way."

Eight the next morning found them wearing Astros caps and loose Hawaiian shirts. They strolled up the River Walk, wishing they had the luxury and the off-duty time to cruise in one of the boats, to actually enjoy water where it flowed freely instead of having to be collected from the sky in cisterns and prized from the soil via deep wells.

"You notice our spotters?" asked Special Agent Macy.

"I supposed Lewison was talking to a couple back there."

Macy pointed to a man sitting by himself on a park bench, sandals, loose Mexican clothing, dark glasses, sombrero tipped down over his head. "There's one, and see, another a couple of hundred yards up there."

"They're unguarded?" said Miller in surprise.

"Not exactly," grinned Macy. "They're wearing stun belts. They try to run, try to warn Saiid, and zap! For twenty seconds or so they'll be wishing we'd just have shot 'em. Anyway, this particular crew is pretty upset with Saiid, him planning to serve them up in tour bus *con carne.*"

Halting in front of the Alamo, Macy issued final instructions. "Sheriff, we figure you and Deputy Miller take turns, one of you stationed as a last line of defense at the ticket entrance, the other floating and mingling with the crowds, eyeing the buses, the parking lots, the restrooms, whatever makes sense. Several of the people you see here this early are law enforcement, already been fed the composites our captive Arabs gave us."

Were it not for the task at hand, the morning would have been pleasant. José appreciated the balmy holiday, the long-legged pretty girls, the running kids with dripping blue and red snow cones.

He and Miller changed out every forty-five minutes or so to

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keep themselves fresh. For the first few hours, nothing. Then, just minutes past noon, the call came in José's earpiece.

"Jesus! He's standing right in front of me, can't be more than twenty feet away." Miller was hissing excitedly.

Then: "This is Captain Lewison, I'm on my way. Miller, you're in front of the theater, right? Have the crew cut off the line about six people in front of the subject. Get the folks already inside out, drop the rope again, and start letting the next group in until he's inside, then stop the line again. Got it? My men will be in place by that time, and we'll minimize civilian exposure."

José sidled over to the end of the theater queue, barely spotting Miller even in his bright shirt. Through the throng, he couldn't see Saiid at all. Within two minutes, a couple of large men elbowed past, arousing a number of mutterings as they hustled up the line. A moment later Lewison himself appeared, waving a camera, just another tourist positioning to snap a photograph of the entrance.

The rope dropped, the queue edged forward. He still couldn't spot Saiid, but when suddenly both Lewison and Miller bolted inside, José dashed past surprised tourists, drawing his automatic at the entrance.

Inside, it had all gone wrong. José found Lewison on his knees, his on-duty Sig-Sauer useless on the floor fifteen feet away. Saiid stood behind him with an ugly black paramilitary knife held across the man's throat. Miller had his own automatic pointed toward the two men. A half dozen tourists pressed against the walls, clutching one another.

"Easy, we want everybody alive." To the tourists, José quietly said, "Go ahead and scramble out now."

Saiid waggled the knife. "I'm giving the orders."

"No, you're not. But what I will do is have one less gun pointed at you while getting these innocent people out of the way." José turned toward Miller. "Escort these folks out, and then regroup at the Jeep M-14." He placed a careful emphasis on the last two words before turning back to the tableau.

"Well, Mr. Saiid, we meet again. Did I pronounce that right? Sah-eed? Or do you prefer Samir? This is pretty smart what you planned. I gather most of your men didn't know they were involuntary suicide bombers?"

"I am not your stupid TV crooks who blabbers his guts out. What I do want is a police car brought to the exit, or I cut his throat."

"Saiid, let's make one thing clear when it comes to Lewison: I . . . don't . . . care. This isn't my jurisdiction and I don't like

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Lewison. Miller thinks he's racist, maybe one of those Aryan Nation types who doesn't like me because I'm one quarter Spanish, and he sure as hell won't like you." José lowered his weapon and hitched his pants.

Saiid chewed his mustache.

"Relax, Mr. Saiid. Now I got to tell you, Samir, most of us Westerners don't believe in that seventy-two virgins scenario that gets promised to those young martyrs."

Saiid sneered. "Who said I believed that? It is an Arabian tale we tell excited, naïve boys. I am not that."

"No, really, Saiid, I reckon parts of it could be true. The problem is that I don't think the beautiful and young slant is right. See, I figure most virgins that make it to heaven have got to be old maids, wrinkled and withered. Oh, sure, you'll find one or two young ones that slip in, but they'll be ugly and never married, or maybe they got burned and scarred badly in those nasty bombings. Ever think about that? Having to spend eternity with your victims? A man's got to worry about how they died."

"Shut up. I said I did not believe the promise of seventy-two virgins. What I do believe in is getting a car out of here."

"No, no, no, you misunderstand me. See, I believe in the virgin theory. But I think the original advertisement was for some number of seventy-two-*year-old* maids? That would fit my theory."

"I told you, I don't believe silly nonsense."

"Could have died in a camel accident. Yo, Saiid, did you know we used to have camels here in the army? It's really true, gospel trivia—U.S. Army camels right here in Texas, genuine Arabian dromedaries. Historical fact."

Saiid's eyes shifted to one side. "What's he doing back? You told him to leave."

José turned and saw that Miller had returned, sighting down the length of a Springfield M-14.

"Oh, Miller? He never takes orders very well. He's much more a friend than a subordinate, my best friend. We used to go to school together. Hell, I once worked for his *papi*."

"Get me a car, or I'm going to slice this one's neck."

"I told you, I don't care. Get this: Knifing him will clear the way and do me a favor, and then I'll just shoot you. Lewison there, he doesn't like wetbacks. He's what you call xenophobic, have I got that straight, Captain? Well, you're right, Lewison, my grandfather was a wetback, only from Germany. Prisoner of war right here in Texas, married my grandmother. Now her father had been here only four hundred years, but my great-grandmother's people go back thousands. That enough of a

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pedigree, Captain, or you got some other beef?"

"You talk to me!" screamed Saiid.

Lewison said, "I know a lot about you, Sheriff. My brother-in-law is running against you."

"Abe Abler? You're Mimi's brother?"

Lewison snorted as well as he could with a knife against his throat. "He never married that bimbo. Abe's my wife's brother."

"So what's he say about me?"

"He insists you're on the take. You do selective enforcement, you let Mexicans get away with anything, you don't arrest illegals, you turn a blind eye to gambling, prostitution, moonshining, and since you run through your budget so fast, you must be pocketing it."

"Budget? Now that's rich. What budget? Abler's a county commissioner, quashes our budget every year, then runs to Vegas or Monaco on a fact-finding junket. Not only that, he's got the county vehicle sales and maintenance contract. We send a Jeep to him for repair, we get it back whenever he damn well feels like fixing it, two, three months down the line, after all his other customers."

"José," cautioned Miller. "No need to get riled."

"Stuff it, Miller. I've about had it with Abler and Mr. Texas Ranger here. I got to tell you, when it comes to arresting a hooker or saving her life from a drunk who's bashing her face in with a beer bottle, I'll arrest the drunk every time. When it comes to a choice of stopping housemaids crossing the border or busting narco-traffickers, I'll take on the drug runners. It's called allocation of limited resources.

"And Abe himself? You know how many times my deputies picked him up on D and D and ran him home instead of jail? And Mimi? It's not prostitution, but she's been caught more than once down on her knees in the Ale Haus men's room. And I have to oversee thousands of acres and cover a county the size of Rhode Island with a penny ante budget, a handful of loyal underpaid men, and arrogant jerks like Abler."

Saiid harshly sawed the blade against Lewison's neck and shouted, "Hey, listen to me!"

"Shut up," said José, red faced, waving his pistol angrily. "You know what happens to wetback children, Lewison? Orphans? Thanks to the lack of processing facilities, they're usually stuck in with the general prison population. Hell, they don't even get lawyers. Know why? They're less than American, which makes them less a person than real criminals. They get beaten and raped, right along with other defenseless detainees. And Ms.

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Yuppie and Mr. Goddamn Goodbar don't care because them Mexican foreigners committed the crime of wanting the same opportunities and freedoms the rest of us have. Go ahead; squeal like a schoolgirl that you didn't know about it."

Miller interrupted. "José? Take it easy, man."

"Take it easy? Miller's assault rifle over there? Nearly half a century old, government surplus. This pistol? At least twenty years old, and this is one of the newer ones, not like your fancy European side arm. Damn, you fire one of these old things, you never can tell what you're gonna hit. Hell, forget Saiid. It's easier to shoot you myself and blame him for it."

José pointed the pistol between Lewison's legs and pulled the trigger.

Blam!

Bits of bone and blood flew just as a burst from Miller's assault rifle chattered.

Lewison gasped.

Saiid crumpled, one hand clutching his ruptured right shoulder, the other groping ineffectively toward his shattered foot.

"Christ," said Lewison. "I'm going to have to change my pants."

José grinned and held out a hand to help him to his feet. "Pee washes out blood, don't you think?"

"I thought you said that's a twenty-year-old pistol."

"It is, but we take good care of 'em. We have to. My real question is, where's the bomb?"

The bomb wasn't difficult to find; it was in the neoprene lunch pack Saiid had brought with him, timer controlled, apparently meant to go off amid the height of the afternoon crowd.

Miller turned his attention to Saiid's injuries, binding first his shoulder and then his foot. Miller had more control over his testosterone than any cop José had ever known. No matter how heinous the criminal, he invariably treated each with meticulous care and a respect for humanity's sake, if not their deeds. José understood that it was important to Miller that he set his own mores as far above the criminal's as possible. No jailhouse beatings on his watch.

"Be a long while before Saiid can travel on foot again," said Lewison, "not that he'll ever have a future outside of a cell. The others—a mixed bag, some, maybe most may be deported if the Feds don't send them off to Guantánamo. Be hard to make a case to be allowed to stay having entered with Saiid."

"I wonder how he got that black mark above his cuff," said José absently, watching Miller slit the prisoner's right pant leg past a black greasy stain.

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Lewison shrugged. "Not many dry cleaners on those coyote trails up from Mexico."

"You know what's bothering me? That's not a lot of explosive in his lunch kit. Just two bricks of plastique? Seems like there should be more."

"I was thinking that too. Maybe there's a second lunch pack or something. I'm having my men go over the museum, theater, and the mission."

"Sheriff," said Miller. "Look what he's been clutching in his pocket." With the tip of his pocketknife Miller held up an ordinary Sears garage door opener.

"Get that in a bag. Ask him what address he's been staying at."

"Samir? How you doin'? We're going to have some painkillers here for you shortly, though the docs tend to be stingy with the good stuff. Get you some Hydroc'one or Darvocet maybe. Hang in here with me. How many fingers do you see? Four? Well, close enough. Can you tell me your address here? 1301? That's for sure? Good. Is that East or West? Okay. Look, the paramedics are here. You're in shock, but you're gonna be okay."

"How'd he do that?" said Lewison. "I can't believe Miller just asked and he told him."

José grinned. "Yep, no squeezing wounds, no prying out info with a screwdriver. Prisoners actually write him thank-you notes. I've got a whole file of them. If big city police departments could clone Miller, it would make a world of difference. That address, thirteen hundred something . . . you know your way around this town?"

With SWAT on standby, the bomb squad entered first. They poked around several minutes before coming out and giving the thumbs-up sign.

More casually, José and Lewison entered, taking their time. The place was perfectly clean, one dish and a glass in the sink, juice and a box of chicken in the refrigerator. Saiid's backpack stood open on the table, rolled cotton socks and underwear beside it.

"You called me a squealing schoolgirl," said Lewison.

José grinned. "I told you to go ahead and squeal *like* a schoolgirl."

Out in the garage, they found the door opener dismantled, the receiver removed. "Not a big surprise," said Lewison. "We'll find it attached to a bomb somewhere. If it doesn't find us first."

They took a second, more thorough pass through the house.

"I wonder why he did that?" said Lewison from the living room.

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"Did what?" said José, rifling through the kitchen garbage bag.

"I wonder why he took the living room thermostat apart."

"He did? Show me. I just found pieces here in the trash."

There on the wall was the round base and cover of the thermostat, painted many times to match the wall, only the guts were missing.

"Let's get back," said José. "This is more dangerous than we thought."

On the trip back with the siren whooping, José explained. "It's a Honeywell thermostat. Been millions of them made since at least the 1950s. I took them apart when I was a kid."

"Why?"

"That's what boys do, take things apart."

"No, I mean why is this important?"

"They have a mercury liquid tilt switch inside. My guess is that Samir not only set the missing bomb to go off on his signal from the garage remote, but he also wired it to go off if it is canted or jarred."

Lewison called this in while José thought. Lewison ordered the grounds to be cleared completely.

"Something else," said José. "I just figured out how he got past our outer perimeter. We were looking for someone to arrive on foot, by car, or by bus."

"So?"

"He must have whipped in on a bicycle." José grimaced ruefully. "The bike rack is opposite the bus stop. There I was, my back to the bike stand watching tourists get off the bus, and he rolls in behind me. Anyway, that means the bomb has to be a size he could carry on his *bicicleta*. Something that would fit in a bike kit, saddle bag, or basket."

Lewison radioed that in too. "I should have figured the bike," he said. "Probably would have if you hadn't nearly shot my knee off. I've heard new bike patrol cops stop complaining about wearing shorts once they ruin their long trousers with chain oil."

They screeched into the plaza where Miller spun toward them and trotted over.

"Can't single out a thing. Bikes all over the damn place, but no bags, baskets, or carriers. The dogs are worn out, frustrated, city cops have covered every inch a tourist could reach and then some. Been over it a dozen times. We managed to locate a couple of tourists who think they saw him ride up on a bike, but nobody recalls seeing him carrying anything other than that little soda lunch pack."

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"His rucksack was back at the house. Course he could have had another one."

"What about storm sewers?"

"We checked. Men's toilets. Women's toilets. Trashcans. Checked and rechecked."

Lewison looked off into the distance, frowning. "He deliver it along the way? Synagogue? Church? 7-11?"

"You know," mused José, "when we were kids, my *papi* used to tell a tale about a border crossing guard and a little Mexican boy."

Miller's eyes widened. "Oh my God," he said, cudgeling his forehead with the heel of his hand. He jogged off, tapping his earpiece, trying to raise the bomb squad.

"What did I just miss?" asked Lewison, puzzled.

"See, here's the story: Every sundown, the border guard stood at a bridge over the Rio and watched this little *niño* carrying a huge sack on his bicycle across the bridge. The boy had a reputation of being a clever little thief, and the guard was convinced he was stealing something, but he couldn't catch him at it."

José started strolling in the direction Miller had taken. "Every evening he'd stop the boy and make him empty the bag. Each time it contained only rags that the boy took home to his mother to sew with. Still, though the guard was left scratching his head, he grew more certain than ever that the boy was stealing. He just couldn't figure what."

"The sacks?" asked Lewison.

"Good answer, but it was just an ordinary gunny sack, not worth stealing. Anyway, the time came for the guard to retire and it was also time for the boy to move on to other things. On his last evening of duty, the guard stopped the boy, had him park his bike and set down his sack. He took the boy aside and said, 'All these years, I know you've been thieving, but I ain't been able to figure out what. I promise not to arrest you, but, *por favor*, just tell me what it is you've been stealing."

"And the boy said?"

"Bicycles."

"Oh," said Lewison. And a moment later, "Oh!"

They rounded the corner and there by the plaza they saw a burly bomb tech clad in black, inching along on his back by the bike rack, Miller off to one side. José and Lewison kept their distance, listening in on the radio.

". . . two wires coming up out of the frame and a glass bulb mercury switch up under the seat . . . PC board has an insulated lead dangling, probably the antenna . . . unless he's got a backup bat-

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tery hidden in the tubular frame . . . the feed appears to be only the one wire pair, though. I can probably just clip the battery out."

"Make it so."

A long moment of silence passed.

"Okay. Got it. Got it. Just back the truck up. Arnie, can we get a bungee cord to tie this sucker to the wall? Kickstand won't do us a bit of good, and I still don't want to lie this nightmare on its side."

They watched the bomb disposal truck back in, beeping. The technician on the ground rolled away and climbed to his feet, shuffling clumsily like a black bear. Gingerly, he lifted the bike and handed it up to a similarly dressed tech in the bed of the truck. Lewison and José stood by watching them as they secured the truck and eased away.

"Good thinking, Sheriff. I reckon the frame of a mountain bike makes about as good a pipe bomb as anything you can find. Mobile and not at all obvious. Fat frame like that would hold, what, close to a liter? That's up to two pounds of Semtex or C4. Shrapnel of bolts and all those spokes? Whew. We got lucky." Lewison shook his head.

"Pity about Saiid. I always hate to see wasted ingenuity."

"Evil is evil, whatever the origin. C'mon, Sheriff. I'll give you and Miller a lift home. I promised my brother-in-law I'd show for his big rally this evening."

"We drove the Jeep up."

"One of the men will drive it back. C'mon. Taking you back allows me to put this on my expense account." He opened the door to his state-issued Ford Expedition.

José shrugged. He supposed chauffeuring was Lewison's way of showing appreciation and, perhaps, a dose of apology. Lewison also opened the door for Miller before driving off. When they pulled out into traffic, José was surprised that Lewison didn't immediately head west toward the highway. Instead, he drove the car southeast toward Stinson Field, where he stopped at a guard shack, spoke to the attendant, and then drove out onto the tarmac where a Gulfstream Turbo Commander was warming up.

"Normally, I'd get one of the Cessnas, but my bosses are pretty happy with the turn of events. No booze aboard, though, just bottled water. Below Midland, we'll pick up an A-Star chopper DPS is sending out."

The sun had already bled out as they swung over the schoolyard

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at the edge of the town limits. The old city center looked fairy-tale pretty from the high darkness, the streets and town square all alight, even some of the bunting visible from the air. The fairgrounds were superbly lit, white tents glowing, Ferris wheel and merry-go-round in full spin.

José could see the fireworks mortars being prepped in anticipation for the wrap-up of a great evening. He supposed he couldn't blame Abler for taking advantage of the celebration to launch his campaign. Increasingly morose feelings washed over him, depressing him the closer they came to landing.

The pilot rotated the tail of the 'copter, cutting off José's view. The machine lowered and settled to the ground, squatting heavily for a moment until its suspension recovered. Once the turbine wound down and the door popped open, he realized they were in the middle of one of the baseball diamonds, boys off to one side pointing excitedly.

Lewison shook his hand, bending over as if he were still under the rotors. "A real pleasure, Sheriff, and thank you. Sorry, but gotta run. I promised Abe I would sit up on stage."

As his hearing returned, José could make out fiddlers warming up, if he could call the scratchy noises music. Over the loudspeakers he recognized Abe Abler's very able voice.

"That's right folks, I'm giving away a free car. Just drop your entries in the barrel. It's a no-crap crapshoot. You win and moreover, the whole county wins because ever' dime goes toward my campaign." A burst of applause erupted, echoed by the excited barking of a dog.

"You tell 'em, Buster. Gives a whole new meanin' to having a son' bitch for sheriff." Bursts of laughter this time.

"Now my faithful followers all know Mimi. It's a beautiful dress she almost has on. Y'all wanna understand gov'ment economics, you study dressmakers: The less you get, the more you pay." More laughter.

"Seems like the sheriff's department been run the same way. The more we pay, the less we done get and the less terrain that's covered. But, hell, we ain't here to review the past, but to preview the future. Right folks?"

More applause. José felt exceptionally glum as he and Miller slipped into the rear of the tent. Still, he believed he'd had a good run as sheriff and much to be proud of.

On stage were seated twenty people. He recognized a third tier TV actor and his anorexic wife, and in a studded shirt was a one-hit rocker who was briefly popular ten years earlier. Near center stage was one of the Dallas Cowboys, plus two tanned

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guys with long curly hair that Mimi appeared to be drooling over.

And Lewison. Man, did he clean up nicely. He'd changed into full dress uniform with braids, ribbons, and medals that would have collapsed a non-Texan under their sheer weight. Abler turned to introduce him.

"And finally, folks, better late than never, it's my pleasure to introduce my friend, brother-in-law, and an honored senior member of the Texas Rangers, Captain Sam Lewison. A round of applause, folks: He's promised to say a few words."

Lewison smiled and waved, at the same time shaking his head at Abler.

"C'mon up, Sam. Don't be modest."

Again Lewison hung back, but people pressed him forward. He tried to whisper something to Abler, but whatever he conveyed, the car dealer slapped him on the back and pushed him toward the podium. Lewison could be heard over the PA, "I'm not real comfortable doing this, Abe."

"Here we go folks, give Captain Lewison a warm Texas welcome."

Lewison took the podium, looking like his collar pinched. "It's been a long day up in San Antone, folks, you'll probably read about it tomorrow. This day has certainly given me a perspective on the Office of Sheriff. It's a job that has no business being political, and yet is entrenched in the political process. Typically, it's underfunded, understaffed, and underappreciated. It's sure a job I wouldn't want, but citizens have a duty to set it above and outside politics." He waved, preparing to wrap up.

Abler clapped him on the back again. "Tell them a few kind words about me."

"Well, Abe's a great guy and I'm a believer in the old adage, the best man for the job. And Abe here, he's a fine brother-in-law and the best salesman I've ever met. Even gave me a discount on my car." A little laughter, more applause.

Abe squeezed Lewison's elbow. "What about me makin' the damn best sheriff in south Texas, Sam?"

Lewison gave a pause. "It's not my place to influence elections."

Abe appeared to grit his teeth and hiss through them. "Sam, c'mon, don't be modest. I insist."

Lewison looked like he was out of patience with the whole business. "I'll just say this, then: Just about twenty-four hours ago I met José, your present sheriff, for the first time. By then, he and Deputy Miller had already helped prevent a half dozen bus bombings. By noon today, they stopped another bombing, disarmed a stone killer, and not incidentally rescued many additional lives. By

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six P.M., your sheriff had foiled yet another bombing, saving many more lives, and arguably you might say he saved the Alamo. How many deaths did he prevent today? Dozens? At the very least. Hundreds? More than likely."

He glanced at Abler. "I feel bad dropping this on Abe, a man who's been fine to me. But José back there saved my life today along with countless others. A man doesn't turn his back on that. José is one of the finest lawmen I ever met, and if you folks don't give him a job, you can bet damn sure my office will make him an offer. I'll see to it."

José had to give Abe credit. The man gamely put on his smile and said, "Folks, y'all enjoy the dance, help yourself to more downhome barbecue, and when you need that next car, you come ask for me, personal. Mimi, Buster, and I will be lookin' forward to seein' you. And now, y'all give a big hand to Pup Fish and the Fiddle Boys."

Earlier, disgusted, disgruntled, José had felt whipped and dog tired. Now, basking in the handshakes and encouraging smiles of people around him, he began to feel invigorated. He glanced at Miller next to him, surprised to see moisture around his friend's eyes.

"Amigo," José said, touched. "Let's find our wives. It's a fine, fine night for dancing."

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

Z NRCCW LOTCZXO QYTQ Z YTSO DRLMOLOM T KGGM DTF HOETRPO GN YZP DGFOW, PZL, TFM QYTQ Z PYTCC YTSO QG ITW NGL QYTQ ELZDO UZQY DW CZNO.

—LGHOLQ STF KRCZB

CIPHER: _

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 133

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MESSENGER FROM HADES

EDWARD D. HOCH

The idea of celebrating his thirtieth birthday in the New World had appealed to Charles Dickens and his wife Kate. They'd sailed from Liverpool on January third of 1842; accompanied by Kate's maid Anne Brown and Dickens's traveling secretary, George Putnam. His first disappointment had been their tiny cabin, where the unusually rough seas of the Atlantic crossing necessitated the regular administration of a little brandy to calm everyone down.

Dickens's arrival in Boston almost three weeks later lifted his spirits. It was an especially clean city, and everywhere he went he encountered enthusiastic readers anxious to meet the author of *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop.* In fact, after a few days he told Kate, "I cannot go into the street without a multitude following me."

"Such is the price of fame, Charles."

He hoped it would be different in New York, a city not nearly so clean as Boston, but here, too, the crowds followed him. The men appalled him with their passion for chewing tobacco, and even a later meeting with President Tyler did not appease him. "They even chew in the White House and Congress," he said. "Can you imagine such a filthy habit in Parliament?"

In Richmond he was revolted by the condition of the slaves he saw, and by the attitude of whites toward slavery. He was pleased to travel north again to Pittsburgh, where a journey west by steamboat seemed to offer an opportunity for relaxation and a degree of anonymity. "I have booked us on a steamboat as far as Cincinnati," Putnam told him. "We spend a few days there and then take another steamboat to St. Louis."

Dickens scratched his chin. "How long is the journey to Cincinnati?"

"Three days. We will arrive there on Monday morning."

Kate Dickens thought a journey was an excellent idea. "I believe you will gain anonymity as we travel west. You will not be

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Hank Blaustein

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besieged by quite so many readers, and we will be able to see more of this vast new country."

So it came to be that Dickens and his wife stood on that Thursday evening at the point where the waters of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers joined to become the mighty Ohio, flowing west to the Mississippi. The steamboat *Messenger* was just coming into the dock. They could see the passenger cabins on the upper deck, but the lower deck just above the waterline was open to the boat's great furnaces and machinery. Its unearthly glow in the nighttime caused Dickens to remark that this *Messenger* seemed to be a messenger from Hades.

On the following morning they went aboard. Putnam had arranged a tiny stateroom for them off the ladies' lounge. He and the maid Anne had two separate, even smaller staterooms. "These are in the stern of the ship," the secretary explained, "and no doubt the sound of the paddle wheels will be more noticeable here. But I am advised that this is the safest area because steamboats generally blow up forward."

"What?" Kate said with a little gasp. "Blow up?"

"I'm sure it's a rare occurrence," he reassured them. "Still, the stern is the best place to be." The secretary gave her one of his pleasant, seductive smiles.

They were under motion before long, and Kate and her maid were already making the acquaintance of other ladies in the cabin. Dickens joined Putnam and they went forward to the men's lounge. A long narrow cabin ran the whole length of the steamboat, with the small stern portion for the ladies. The rest consisted of a gentlemen's bar, with a long table running down the center of the room for card-playing or whatever. There was a stove at this end, as there was for the ladies, and burning wood helped take the chill off the February air. The men's area was thick with cigar smoke, and one man who detected Dickens's English accent immediately offered him a cigar.

"You're a long way from home," he said. He was a bit older than Dickens, perhaps in his mid thirties, and his hawkish nose reminded the author of President Tyler. "I'm Sam Fitzroy, a commercial traveler. I take it you're from England?"

When Dickens hesitated in his reply, George Putnam broke in. "He's Charles Dickens, the well-known novelist."

Fitzroy frowned. "I may have heard the name. I am a great admirer of the late Sir Walter Scott. Have you read *The Heart of Midlothian?*"

"A fine book," Dickens agreed. "I suspect he is better known to most Americans as the author of *Ivanhoe.*"

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"Of course. It sold a great many copies. Tell me, where are you headed from here?"

"I am touring the eastern part of your country with my wife. This is my traveling secretary, Mr. George Putnam."

The two men shook hands and Fitzroy invited them to take a seat. Farther down the table a few men were starting a card game. "What do you think of our country?" he asked Dickens.

"It is a fine land, though the people seem too much alike. There is little diversity of character, except in the unfortunate slavery areas. Look around you. Even on this steamboat they are much the same."

Fitzroy smiled and motioned toward one man with a bandaged head and dark whiskers. "Not him, certainly."

"What happened to you?" Dickens asked the injured man.

He gave a wan smile. "I was traveling west with my wife, and our stagecoach overturned. We were both injured and she refuses to travel by coach again. I trust this will be a safer journey west."

"She is with you?"

He nodded. "In the ladies' cabin. It was too drowsy a place for me, so I came forward to have a drink." He held out his hand. "Name's Hugh Cartwright."

They introduced themselves and Fitzroy said, "Supper is not served until six. Perhaps you gentlemen would enjoy a card game while we wait."

That seemed agreeable to everyone, and Fitzroy produced a deck of cards. "Commercial travelers have a great deal of time on their hands," he said as he shuffled the cards. "Shall we have a few hands of poker, just for fun?" he suggested.

"I never play cards for fun," Cartwright said. "We can at least bet a few cents."

That was agreeable, with a ten-cent limit, and after an hour's play everyone was about even. Dickens was growing tired of the game when Fitzroy suggested, "Shall we join the ladies?"

Dickens discovered that Kate and her maid Anne had left the ladies' cabin and gone up on the roof, the only place with any deck area for viewing the countryside as they passed. The twin iron smokestacks sent out feathery sparks that floated and died as they drifted down.

"You shouldn't be up here," Dickens cautioned. "It may not be safe."

"Oh, poo!" Kate replied. "Here, meet our new friend, Letitia Cartwright."

She was a slender young woman with an attractive face and short black hair. She smiled as she greeted them. "Mr. Dickens, I'm a great admirer of your novels."

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He returned her smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Cartwright. I believe I just lost twenty cents in a poker game with your husband."

Letitia Cartwright's smile broadened. "You were lucky if that's all you lost. He's a demon with cards." She glanced at Putnam. "And who might this be?"

"My secretary, George Putnam."

She faced Putnam, a bit shorter than he was, and asked, "Is your wife along too?"

"I'm not married."

"Too bad."

Kate Dickens cleared her throat. "Letitia has the same first name as President Tyler's wife, Charles. Isn't that interesting?"

"I know," Mrs. Cartwright said. "The woman is crippled and in poor health. It's very sad."

Dickens nodded. "We were sorry we couldn't meet her when we visited the President. But tell me about your own injury, Mrs. Cartwright. Your husband says your stagecoach overturned."

"What a horrible experience!" Kate sympathized. "I cannot imagine anything like that happening back home."

"It's not so uncommon over here. I think our coach drivers are more reckless. But I only had a few bruises. Hugh had quite a gash in his head. For a few days I feared he would die."

They were joined then by the steamboat's captain, a jolly man with graying hair and a walrus mustache. "Enjoying the view?" he asked them. "I'm Captain Quentin, in charge of the *Messenger*. Is this your first journey on a steamboat?"

"It is ours," Dickens told him, and Putnam launched into his usual announcement of the author's fame.

"Of course!" the captain responded. "I read parts of *The Pickwick Papers* when it ran in this country. Are you gathering material for a novel set in America?"

"Perhaps," Dickens replied. "Tell me a bit about the boat. How many passengers does it carry?"

"We have thirty-nine on this trip, which is near capacity for our staterooms. There's space for poorer persons on the lower deck, mainly Irish immigrant families who will disembark along the way. We also have some children, hired to keep the furnaces going."

Soon it was time for the six o'clock supper, when the stateroom passengers gathered together at the long table for a meal of hot cornbread and dried beef, with side dishes of beet-root, pickles, pumpkin, apple sauce, and Indian corn. Pitchers of cold water seemed to be the only beverage available, and Dickens was glad he still had some brandy in his carpetbag.

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After dark they made their way to the lower deck, where the liveliness of the immigrants manifested itself in the singing of hymns and the occasional firing of pistols into the air. "They seem to be having a better time down here than up above," Letitia Cartwright observed.

Dickens slept little that first night on the river. He roused himself just after six without disturbing Kate in the other bunk and made his way out through the deserted ladies' cabin to the men's lounge up front. The odor of cigar smoke still hung in the air, especially near the bar. He was surprised to find that he wasn't alone. A man dozed at one end of the long table, his bandaged head telling Dickens that it was Hugh Cartwright.

"Mr. Cartwright," he said, shaking him a bit.

Cartwright was instantly awake. "What is it?"

"Are you all right? I thought perhaps your head injury had—"

He shook his head. "No, no, I'm fine. A bit too much to drink. I must have fallen asleep."

"Your wife will be concerned for you."

"Yes. Thank you for waking me."

He went off toward his stateroom, and Dickens decided it was almost time to dress for breakfast at seven. The meal itself was less than exciting, consisting mainly of more hot cornbread and coffee. Kate commented that she'd rather sleep late and skip it the next morning.

"The dinner at half past twelve is enough to keep me going for the day, Charles. Why do I need three bad meals each day?"

He admitted she had a point, and Putnam quickly agreed with her. "Let's all sleep in tomorrow. It's Sunday, after all."

Anne Brown, Kate's maid, spoke up. "Will there be church services?"

"No, dear," Kate answered. "Perhaps you can find a church in Cincinnati when we dock on Monday."

After breakfast they went down to the lower deck to watch one family of Irish immigrants being rowed ashore. The captain told them such families were often dropped off, as they hoped to build a log cabin and live off the land. They had chosen a desolate stretch of the river to call home, but Dickens wished them well. Letitia Cartwright came with them to watch, and Dickens inquired as to whether her husband had returned to the stateroom.

She nodded. "I fear this often happens when he's had too much to drink. He's still not recovered from his head injury, so I cannot be too critical of him."

For a time they watched the passing landscape, occasionally encountering a little green island in the wide Ohio River and once

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stopping to purchase more wood for the furnaces. There were scatterings of log cabins on the shore and fields of wheat and corn. By ten o'clock the eastern sun had risen above the treetops behind them. Some children shouted to them from the shore, and a dog ran out on a fallen tree to await their passage. All the while the steady thumping of the paddle wheels marked the *Messenger's* progress toward its destination.

Upstairs Dickens and his secretary encountered Sam Fitzroy, looking for a morning's card game. "Come on!" he urged. "We have to do something to pass the time. Where's Hugh, the other one?"

Letitia answered. "That's my husband. He's probably sleeping it off in our stateroom. I'll go wake him." Dickens thought he caught a little wink she seemed to aim at Putnam, but he may have imagined it.

As it turned out, that day's poker game didn't begin until two o'clock, after the dinner hour. By that time Hugh Cartwright had joined them, and the bar at the front end of the men's lounge was open for business. The women had retreated to the ladies' cabin for a rest.

"Yesterday's game was fun," Fitzroy said, "but I think we should up the limit a bit. Ten cents is chicken feed."

"How about a half dollar?" Cartwright suggested.

"Let's make it a dollar. Are you gentlemen game for that?"

Dickens and Putnam agreed with some reluctance. Silver dollars were tossed onto the center of the table, and they cut the cards to choose the dealer. Dickens won the first hand, but that soon changed. Gradually the pile of silver dollars built up in front of Fitzroy, until the rest of them decided to drop out. "I hate to take your money like that," he said. "We've got one more day before we reach Cincinnati. I'll give you an opportunity to win it back tomorrow."

Later, when they were alone, Putnam asked, "Do you think he could have cheated us?"

Dickens pondered the question. "I have read of professional gamblers quite skillful at cards. It is possible we have encountered one, though there's little we can do except stay clear of his games in the future."

Hugh Cartwright and his wife joined them at the table for supper that evening. While Dickens chatted with Hugh, he couldn't help noting once more his secretary's interest in Letitia Cartwright. After dinner they went up on the steamboat's roof to look at the stars. Dickens pulled Hugh Cartwright aside and brought up the subject of the card game. "My secretary wonders if Fitzroy might have cheated us this afternoon."

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"I was wondering that myself," he replied. "I should have a talk with him tonight. The three of us together lost over two hundred dollars."

Kate retired early while Dickens made some entries in his journal by lamplight. He thought there was a way he could incorporate some American scenes into his next novel. It still seemed a bit soon to retire, so he returned to the smoking lounge to find Cartwright. The man was seated at one end of the long table, already a bit high on scotch.

"Don't you think you should go back to your stateroom?" Dickens asked him. "Letitia will be worried about you."

He mumbled something and called for the bartender to bring him another drink. Dickens sighed and turned away. It was not his job tending to a man he hardly knew.

It was still dark when he awakened. He stretched out in his bunk bed and listened, but he could hear nothing. Then he realized it was the silence that had awakened him. The engines had stopped. The paddle wheels were quiet in the water. Kate was still sleeping as he slipped out of his bunk and left the stateroom. It didn't seem possible that they'd arrived at their destination so quickly.

In the ladies' cabin he ran into Putnam coming out of his stateroom, still buttoning his trousers. "What is it?" he asked. "What happened?"

"I don't know. We've stopped moving." He gave his secretary a critical stare. "Your trouser cuff is turned up."

"I got dressed quickly," he explained, adjusting it. "We seem to have pulled in at a dock."

The two men passed into the smoking parlor, where a circle of men stood near the stairs leading to the lower deck. "What's happened?" Dickens asked Captain Quentin, the only face he recognized.

"There's been an . . . accident. We had to dock and report it to the local sheriff."

Dickens came closer and peered down the stairs. "Is that Cartwright?"

Quentin nodded. "I'm afraid he's dead. This is Sheriff Reilly now."

Reilly was a stout man in overalls, obviously a local farmer who'd remembered to pin on his sheriff's badge before coming down to investigate. "What happened here?" he demanded in his most authoritative voice, with a brogue that suggested he might have been dropped off by an earlier steamboat.

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It was Captain Quentin who answered. "I came down shortly after midnight to close the bar and check the cash. Our bartender had gone and I noticed Mr. Cartwright dozing at the table, same as the night before. A man came up the staircase from the lower deck. He looked vaguely familiar to me, but he didn't speak. Instead he went over to Cartwright and bent down as if whispering a message in his ear. Cartwright sort of came to then, and the man helped him to his feet, guiding him toward these stairs. I doubt if he even noticed me behind the bar. They seemed to struggle a bit, and Cartwright started to fall. That's when I shouted and ran to help. Cartwright had fallen to the bottom, and the other man hurried after him. I suppose it was one of the immigrants I'd seen around down there, but the man quickly disappeared around the furnace. I tried to help Cartwright, but it was too late. He was dead."

The sheriff became aware of Dickens's presence for the first time. "What about you?"

"I'm a passenger. We're traveling to Cincinnati."

"Foreigner, eh?"

"British."

"Did you know the dead man?"

Dickens answered. "I met him when we left Pittsburgh. We dined together and played poker. Could his death have been an accident?"

"Maybe an accident, maybe something else."

At those words came a scream from the far end of the lounge. Letitia Cartwright, still in her robe and slippers, had entered the lounge just in time to learn her husband's fate. She fought her way through to the stairs, but Captain Quentin reached her just in time and pulled her away. "Let me go!" she shouted. "He's my husband!"

By now the uproar had awakened any late sleepers. Sam Fitzroy appeared at the door, bleary eyed, to ask, "What's going on?" Dickens saw Kate coming in behind him.

He told them briefly about Cartwright's death, while Sheriff Reilly was suggesting the captain try to identify the man he'd seen bending over the victim. "We'll bring everyone from below up here for you to see, including the crew."

"I know my crew," Quentin insisted. "It wasn't any of them."

Then Dickens was asked to go downstairs with the sheriff to examine the body. "What's this?" Dickens asked, prying apart the clenched fingers of Cartwright's left hand to remove something small he'd found there. "A button!" he announced. It was indeed a button, of a type commonly found on men's jackets. A few threads were attached, as if it had been pulled off by force. They went back upstairs and Sheriff Reilly held up the button.

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"It looks as if the dead man tried to fight off the person who seemed to be helping him. Any of you see this button before?" They were all staring at it, and suddenly Dickens saw with a shock a button missing from his secretary's coat.

"George, is this your button?" Dickens's secretary glanced down at the gaping space.

"Did you kill him, son?" the sheriff asked Putnam in a voice just a shade too benign.

"Of course not! I had no reason to! I hardly knew the man."

"Half the men on this steamboat probably have jackets with that identical button," Dickens insisted, recovering from his shock to come to his secretary's defense.

"But he's the one who's missing a button," Sheriff Reilly noted. "Mr. Putnam, I'm going to have to ask that you accompany me to—"

It was Letitia then who interrupted him, her eyes still wet with tears. "Wait! You can't arrest him. He couldn't have killed my husband because I—I was with him in his stateroom all night."

Dickens stared hard at his secretary. "Is that true, George?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. I'm sorry if I've offended you and Mrs. Dickens."

Dickens glanced over at Kate, standing near the back of the room, but couldn't read the expression on her face. Sheriff Reilly pondered for just a moment, then asked, "Did he leave his stateroom at all?"

"No," Letitia insisted. "He was there with me all the time."

"What about it, Captain? Was Mr. Putnam here the man you saw approach the victim."

"No," he answered a bit uncertainly. "They looked something alike, but that wasn't him."

The sheriff turned to one of his deputies, another obvious farmer who hadn't bothered with his badge. "Len, round up everyone on the lower deck and bring them up here."

They waited and watched through the next quarter hour as crew members and the remaining immigrants were paraded up the stairs from below.

"It was none of my crew," the captain insisted again. "I know them all." He was less certain about one or two of the better-dressed immigrants, but finally decided it was none of them. No one else had a missing button.

"Could anyone have left the boat before the sheriff arrived?" Dickens wondered.

Captain Quentin shook his head. "Not unless they dove overboard and swam to shore, and that water is mighty cold in February."

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Despite the alibi offered by Mrs. Cartwright, Dickens felt he had to get to the bottom of this if he was to completely clear his secretary of suspicion. He turned his attention to Sam Fitzroy who'd remained silent till now. "Sam, I have to be frank with you. The last time I spoke with Cartwright, we were both wondering if you might have cheated us at cards. He said he was going to speak to you about it."

"That's preposterous!" he said, his face reddening at the suggestion. "I had no conversation with him all evening, and no one has ever accused me of cheating at cards."

"It appears someone killed him," Dickens said. "Someone with a motive."

"The captain said the killer came from below."

Sheriff Reilly offered an opinion. "He might have gone downstairs from this deck and then come back up. Of course, we only have the captain's testimony that he was ever here in the first place."

Now it was Quentin's turn to bristle. "You have a dead man. What more proof do you need? I certainly had no motive for killing him."

"Nor did my secretary," Dickens pointed out.

"Maybe not," the sheriff said, "but he was sleeping with the victim's wife. In these parts, that would be plenty of motive."

"He has an alibi," Dickens reminded the man, and even as he spoke the words the truth became apparent to him. "Alibi!" he repeated. "Of course!"

"What is it?"

"Don't you see it? George Putnam lost a button from his jacket and Cartwright died with one in his grasp. Even though it was a common type of button, we can't believe it was a coincidence. No one else on the boat is missing a button. When Letitia confessed to spending the night with George, she wasn't giving him an alibi. She was giving herself an alibi."

"What are you trying to say, Mr. Dickens?"

"It was Letitia who killed her husband. She was wearing George's clothes when she did it."

George Putnam was the first to question Dickens's statement. "That couldn't be so! She never left the room."

"I doubt if you were awake every minute of the night, George. She knew where to find her husband after his previous night's drinking, and it would only have taken her ten or fifteen minutes to slip into your trousers and shirt and jacket, go downstairs, and

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then come up by the smoking lounge. She seemed to be helping him and he let her, until he realized she was trying to push him down the stairs. That's when he yanked the button from the jacket. She went back to your room, never realizing the button was missing."

Letitia had gone pale at Dickens's words. Now she spoke for the first time. "You can't prove any of that."

Dickens sighed. "When George dressed this morning, I noticed one of his trouser legs was turned up. You had to turn them up because you're shorter than he is. With your short haircut and wearing men's clothes you could easily pass for a man at a quick glance. The very fact that you disguised yourself shows you planned to kill him in advance."

He expected her denials to continue, but the fight seemed to have gone out of her. She sat down as if exhausted and started to speak. "After the stagecoach overturned and I thought he was going to die, it was such a sense of relief. I wanted to be free again, but then he didn't die. It gnawed at me, thinking of a bitter lifetime ahead. I saw my chance last night. I knew he'd be sleeping off another drunk by the bar, so when George dozed off I slipped into his clothes and went out to the bar. I was frightened when I saw the captain, but he didn't recognize me. After I did it, I returned to George's stateroom. I undressed, not noticing the missing button, and awakened him as if I'd been there the whole time."

Nobody said a great deal as the body was removed from the boat and Letitia was taken away in handcuffs. There would be plenty of time for talk later. That evening, as Dickens was writing in his journal, George Putnam came to him, looking more than a little sheepish. "I know I'm not in a position to ask favors, Mr. Dickens, but I was wondering—"

"What is it, George?"

"In your journal about your trip to America, could you leave out any mention of the murder, and my innocent part in it?"

"Not so innocent," Dickens told him with a slight smile. "But it will not be mentioned in my American notes. I have more than enough observations of this strange new country."

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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

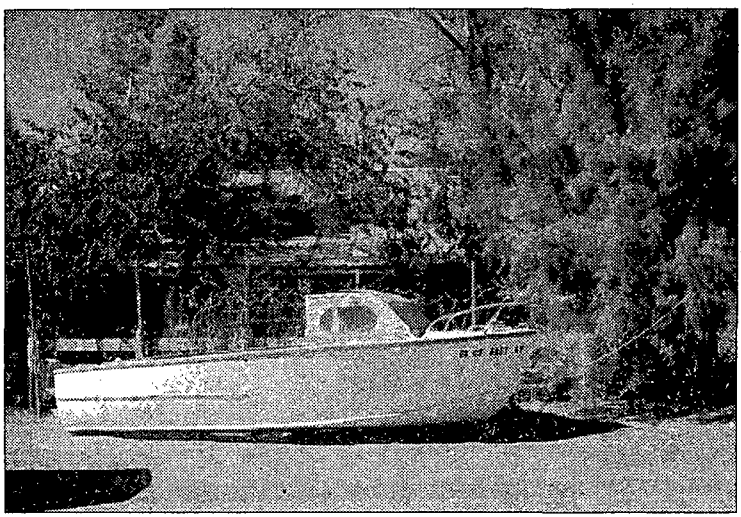


Photo by Myrna J. Yancey

Dry Run

We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 140.

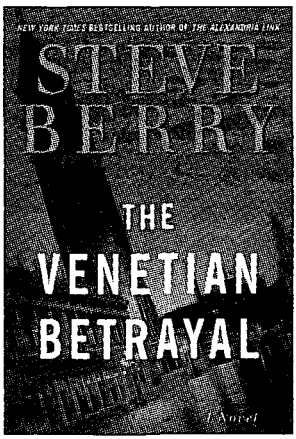
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Booked & Printed

Robert C. Hahn

The secrets of the past give rise to present dangers in two new thrillers, while a new mystery brings one of history's greatest geniuses to life.

Steve Berry's four previous thrillers, including *The Templar Legacy* and *The Alexandria Link*, have already established him on the bestseller lists. The Venetian Betrayal (Ballantine, $25.95) is his third book to feature Cotton Malone, a former U.S. State department operative who has retired to run a bookstore in Copenhagen. Berry spins a tale that is part historical mystery and part alternative history. Like *The Da Vinci Code*, the characters here begin their journey/chase in a museum. A simple request from a friend, Cassiopeia Vitt, leads Malone to a museum of Greco-Roman culture, where Malone and his friends find themselves in a high-stakes game in which the immediate objective is securing the eight obscure coins, known as Elephant Medallions, picturing Alexander fighting an elephant and believed by the seekers to contain a vital clue to the location of Alexander's tomb.



Adding urgency to their quest, which takes them across Europe and Central Asia, is the threat of germ warfare: Following the disaster of U.S. involvement in the Middle East, a powerful European trading bloc headquartered in Venice has emerged, and the only obstruction to its world domination via biological weapons is an antidote hidden in the ancient tomb.

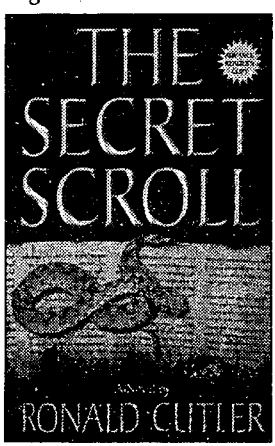
Berry fills his large canvas with colorful, sometimes gaudy characters. Among the principal players are Enrico Vincenti, wealthy owner of a major pharmaceutical company and leader of the Venice-based Council of Ten that exerts major influence on world trade markets; Supreme Minister Irina Zovastina, leader of the Central Asian Federation, a nation cobbled together from the

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"stans" of the former Soviet Union (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan). Zovastina's vaulting ambition is to emulate the conquests of Alexander, though by very different means. Add enough diplomats, spies, government agents, and double-agents to create confusion and uncertainty and the stage is set for a worldwide romp, but despite the intervention and interests of so many powerful entities, what it comes down to is Malone and his few friends against overwhelming odds in the best thriller tradition.

Even more ambitious in concept is Ronald Cutler's debut novel THE SECRET SCROLL (Beaufort Books, $24.95), whose hero unearths a scroll that may have been written by Yehoshua ben Yosef, the person we know better as Jesus Christ.

Cutler's novel explores the effects the discovery of a scroll written by Jesus Christ might have and makes the excellent point that regardless of what the scroll said, its attribution was sure to be challenged by vested interests that are threatened by such a document.



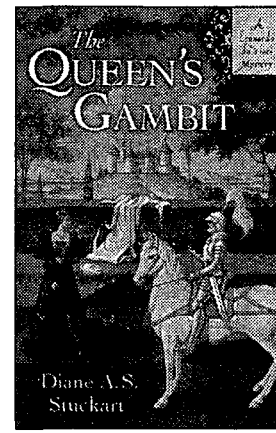
When American biblical archaeologist Josh Cohan visits Israel and drives through the Judean desert, he is mystically led to the small cave and the ancient jar containing the scroll. Cohan tries to safeguard the find while he negotiates with the Israel Antiquities Authority to assure himself a place at the table when the scroll is translated and analyzed to determine its age and authenticity, but trouble begins immediately and not only with the experts of the IAA, but also with a mysterious group called the Guardians. The Guardians, led by a man known only as the Master, are powerful, fanatical, and virulently anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Catholic; they believe themselves to be the "guardians" of true Christianity. Into this biblical intrigue Cutler tosses a romantic entanglement—Cohan falls for one of the translator's daughters, whose disappearance is thought to be an act of the Guardians.

Despite some almost comic-book evil characters and the predictability of the love interest, what Cutler does have working for him is a nice rendering of Israel's historical sites and a hero whose signs of possessing mystical powers promise to be explored in future works.

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Diane A. S. Stuckart offers insight into Leonardo da Vinci as revealed by his eager young apprentice who helps him translate a letter and solve a murder in THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT (Berkley Prime Crime, $23.95). Mystery, rather than thriller, *The Queen's Gambit* is a departure for the author who has written historical romances under the pen names Alexa Smart and Anna Gerard. It is a very successful departure.



It doesn't hurt that Stuckart has chosen the enigmatic and magical Leonardo da Vinci as the central historical figure for her mystery, but to both complement and illuminate da Vinci she has created the apprentice, Delfina della Fazia, better known to her fellow apprentices as "Dino." She is known by the masculine appellation for the simple reason that she is masquerading as a boy, since young women in the year 1483, when Stuckart begins her tale, could not be apprentices.

Dino discovers a corpse in the garden of da Vinci's patron, Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. The victim is a relative of the Duke and the white bishop in a living chess game the Duke had arranged on a whim. Da Vinci is charged by the Duke with the task of discovering who murdered his cousin, and da Vinci in turn enlists his apprentice to assist him in his investigation.

Stuckart's narrative artfully interweaves Dino's back story, tidbits about the life and times of the various classes of servants, tradesmen, and nobility in fifteenth-century Italy, and much about da Vinci as artist, inventor, engineer, scientist, and, in this particular instance, sleuth.

The result is an enjoyable period mystery with the usual gender-based humor caused by Dino's disguise, augmenting the fierce loyalty of Dino to her master and da Vinci's growing appreciation for the young "lad's" skills.

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MURDER IN THE BARRENS

JUDY ROE

At noon on Monday two witnesses saw Rigu Wazhi bash in Thokoreh Viska's skull with a rock hammer. Not until four hours later did word of the homicide reach the district police authority in Mahkopol, thirty miles away. By that time Thokoreh's body had been consigned to the vultures and Rigu had disappeared.

The victim had been the chieftain of the Ochirs, a trash clan presently engaged in robbing ancient graves. The police never took any notice of the Ochirs' activities. It wasn't their job. Grave robbing was the government's concern, a concern rarely exercised.

But homicide was definitely a matter for the police. At five P.M., taking his own car, Inspector Tal Zhaga drove out of the dusty town of Mahkopol onto the dirt road that led across the western barrens of Upper Tavik. At quarter to six he arrived at the village of Hulyas and parked outside the inn where he was to meet with the constable.

The constable had not yet arrived. Zhaga identified himself to the innkeeper and revealed his errand.

The innkeeper promptly launched into a cheerfully malicious commentary on the alleged perpetrator, a local swaggerer and thin-skinned hothead. "Rigu must want people to take him for a rock star, the way he's been strutting around in those ludicrous new clothes. Yet he lives in a cave, can you believe it? It used to be his mine tunnel until the deposit petered out three months ago. When he began a new tunnel in the side of his claim, he made a cave out of the old tunnel and moved into it. What a *pikida*-pinching *ghupo!* He's the only miner to do that. The other miners live in town . . . Rigu beats his wife, I think you should know. Everybody has to watch out for Rigu's temper. And to watch out not to insult his funny-looking hybrid hair."

"Hybrid?" Zhaga asked, although he knew what the innkeeper

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meant—Rigu's self-admiration was unseemly in a mixed breed. In point of fact, all Tavikis, including Zhaga and the innkeeper, were hybrids, descended from indigenous brown Kabus and conquering blond Wythians.

"Yes," the innkeeper said. "That hair of his is really strange. It's not quite Wythian blond, but it will make you stop and look. Rigu is so proud of his hair he wears it down past his shoulders."

"I'd like to see that," Zhaga said.

"You never will. You took too long getting here, Inspector. Rigu must be miles away by now. You'll never catch him."

Good, Zhaga thought. A simple case. He needed things to remain simple.

The constable arrived. "I'm late, I know. But the district pays me such a stingy stipend I can't afford to neglect my own business. I had an emergency call to go look at a dead generator."

"Did you have a similar call earlier today?" Zhaga asked. "One that caused you to be late reporting the homicide?"

"You guessed it. I was working on a noisy pump and didn't hear my cell phone ringing. It was after three o'clock before I learned what had happened."

But then with due diligence the constable had interviewed the witnesses and called the district police authority to report that Rigu Wazhi had been observed on top of bluff Number Five at noon, hostilely confronting Thokoreh Viska. Rigu had smashed in Thokoreh's head with a rock hammer and then vanished down the back slope of the bluff, wearing Ugar pantaloons, a brocade coat, a wide-brimmed planter's hat, and new scarlet boots. Later, he had been glimpsed in town at about three thirty in the afternoon and after that was seen no more.

Zhaga asked, "Had there been ill feeling between the victim and the alleged perpetrator?"

"Plenty." The constable tore two pages from his notepad and handed them to Zhaga. "Here are the names of the witnesses and where to find them, plus everything else I know. Oh, except that some of the younger Ochirs have vowed to take Rigu Wazhi's head. If they can't find Rigu, they say they'll take his wife's head."

Zhaga felt a tightening at his temples. An unwelcome urgency had just been thrust upon him.

Zhaga got back in his car and drove farther west, following the innkeeper's directions. He arrived at a range of low, blue gray bluffs, a geological anomaly in the yellow-ochre barrens. There were adnanite mines in the bluffs. Adnanite had recently come to be useful in the manufacture of electronic devices. The government was allowing individual miners to extract the adnanite by

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hand, as the veins in the bluffs were too thin to interest any mining company.

Zhaga spied the plank door the innkeeper had told him to look for, recessed in the face of a bluff. A Peugeot was parked in front. Zhaga parked beside it and went up to the plank door. Below the door's peephole was another hole with a string hanging from it. He pulled the string. A goat bell clanked on the other side.

"My husband did not kill Thokoreh Viska," Rigu Wazhi's wife Amiri declared, pouring tea. She had drawn the water for the tea from a five gallon jug and heated the water on a propane stove. "Those witnesses must have seen an impostor. Please sit."

Although protocol required that police personnel remain standing, Zhaga saw no harm in being polite. He awkwardly descended in his city suit onto a sagging floor cushion. Accepting a mug of tea from Rigu's wife, he leaned back against a lumpy roll of bedding.

The room was close and cool, like a dairy pantry, being simply an earthen cave with a ten-inch vent shaft rising to the top of the bluff. A battery lantern shed harsh light. Incense was burning. Zhaga had searched the premises five minutes before and knew that behind the main room was a second, smaller room, where a chemical toilet stood under a larger air shaft.

Rigu's wife sat down on a floor cushion opposite Zhaga. She was a small, fine-boned woman with ivory skin. Her dark lavender eyes were like those of a Dirig witch. Her bare arms bore livid discolorations. She was from Tavikopol. Two months before, Rigu Wazhi had brought her to his cave as his bride.

Zhaga addressed her formally. "*Rehira*, your husband would be difficult to impersonate. Two witnesses recognized his distinctive clothing and his unusual hair."

"It is exactly because my husband's hair and clothing are distinctive that anyone wearing clothes like his, and a wig the same color as his hair, would be assumed to be him. That was not Rigu the witnesses saw. My husband has not fled. He is very sensibly staying out of sight until the murderer is found."

"Rehira, if your husband was not on bluff Number Five at noon today, where was he?"

"In his mine, of course."

"Did you actually see him there?"

"No. He does not permit anyone to enter his mine. But I saw him when he came home for his midday meal at twelve fifteen."

"He had only to walk around the corner of the bluff to come home from his mine, am I correct?"

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"You are."

"Was your husband wearing his new clothes in his mine?"

"Certainly not. He was wearing his work clothes. Rigu is very careful with his new clothes. He wears them only on occasions that are important to him, or when he goes into town."

"He was seen in town today, wearing his new clothes."

Amiri made a fluttery gesture of distress. "Yes, I know, and it was my fault. Usually he takes a half-hour nap after lunch and then leaves for the afternoon. But today he slept on and on. I could not rouse him. He was still sleeping at three o'clock when I left to go into the village for provisions. I shouldn't have done that. I can completely understand why he got dressed and drove into the village after me. He must have become angry when he woke up to find that I had left without telling him."

"Did he confront you in the village?"

"I'm afraid so. Though, not actually. I had just parked my car in front of the general store and was getting out, when I saw Rigu's truck roaring straight at me. Several other people saw it too. For a moment I thought Rigu meant to run me over. But instead, he came to a halt about forty feet away. He got out of the truck and took a stride toward me. Then he hesitated and made a threatening gesture at me as if to say he would take care of me later. He got back into his truck and sped off. That was at three thirty. No one has seen him since."

"Rehira, I think you know very well where your husband is. You are defending him now only because you fear him. There are marks of mistreatment on you. You think that if I arrest him he will somehow escape from custody and come back to punish you."

"Untrue! My husband does not mistreat me. He is simply excitable. If I have marks on me, it is my own fault. I should try harder to please him."

Zhaga had heard such denials from other battered wives. Nevertheless, it surprised him to hear the same words uttered by an obviously self-regarding woman.

"Rehira, the Ochirs have vowed to take your husband's head. If they cannot find your husband, they will come after yours. It would be dangerous for you to remain here. I can take you to a place where you will be safe." Zhaga stood up and set his tea mug on the only table, next to the kitchen knives and Amiri's cell phone. He had not drunk any of the tea.

Amiri stood up. "Inspector, I claim the right to decline protective custody."

Evidently Amiri was familiar with Article Twelve.

Zhaga said, "Then I will post the constable to guard your cave."

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"I decline protective surveillance."

Evidently Amiri was familiar with Article Thirteen as well. Here was a strong woman, so unlike needy, perfidious Lela. *Ah, Lela.*

Stricken with admiration, Zhaga asked, "Rehira, have you been educated?"

Amiri's smile was bitter. "Beyond what Taviki law permits for women. Inspector, your concern should not be for me, but for my husband. Find Thokoreh's killer so that my innocent husband may return home."

"Rehira, the Ochirs mean to take your head."

"Inspector, find Thokoreh's killer and they will not."

The tightening at Zhaga's temples grew worse. Ten days before, when Zhaga had been offered the position of Level Two Police Inspector by the Mahkopol district authority, he had gratefully accepted, even though it meant having to start at a lower rank than the one he held in the capital city. He had needed a less stressful job while he recovered from his divorce. And now look.

"Inspector, those witnesses were mistaken. Have you interviewed them yet?"

Zhaga had not. His first obligation had been to warn Rigu's wife about the vengeful Ochirs and to protect her from them. "No," he admitted.

Amiri raised her eyebrows.

Zhaga bade Amiri good night after giving her his cell phone number and making her promise to barricade her door. He drove back to the village. Night had fallen. He paid for a room at the inn. The dining room was still open, but he did not feel like eating. He went directly to his room.

Early Tuesday morning Zhaga interviewed the two witnesses, both of them miners. He spoke first with Hobarut, at a table in the inn's dining room.

Hobarut said, "It was noon, and I had come out of my mine to eat my lunch when I saw Rigu on bluff Number Five having words with Thokoreh."

"Was Thokoreh also a miner?"

"Hardly. Thokoreh was a career criminal. Bluff Number Five is an abandoned claim. The Ochirs have been using it as a lookout station. Thokoreh would stand up there and watch for government vehicles, while his ragtag family dug in the old Kabu cemetery for grave goods. Thokoreh couldn't dig with the others because of his bad right arm. His arm was so useless he had to carry his chieftain's club in his left hand. It was in his left hand when he swung at Rigu. He missed. Rigu laughed at him.

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Thokoreh started hopping around on his bandy little legs, swinging and missing. Rigu was dodging and laughing. But then Thokoreh must have said something really terrible because Rigu suddenly stopped laughing and bashed in Thokoreh's skull. Then he disappeared down the back slope."

"How do you know it was Rigu?"

"That hair. Those clothes. That attitude. I tried calling the constable, but he wasn't answering his phone. I didn't get through to him until three o'clock."

"When you couldn't get through to the constable, why didn't you call the district police authority in Mahkopol?"

"That's the constable's job. I did my part."

"Had there been prior ill feeling between Rigu and Thokoreh?"

"*Hoah*, yes. For weeks Rigu has been selling artifacts to the same city people who were buying Thokoreh's grave goods. Thokoreh had been griping that Rigu was poaching on the Ochirs' preserve. He claimed—get this!—that all artifacts buried in the barrens were the property of the Ochirs by right of thieves' tradition, heh heh. Thokoreh was too much of a coward, but you can be sure Rigu heard about it."

"From whom?"

"From me." Hobarut chuckled. "I enjoy ragging Rigu. It's so easy to enrage him. Yesterday morning on my way to work I stopped by his cave to tell him that Thokoreh was calling him a bleached blond. Apparently Rigu wholly believed me and stewed over the insult because three hours later, there he was, up on bluff Number Five, in that preposterous costume, yelling at Thokoreh."

"Did you see Rigu again after he disappeared from the bluff?"

"Oh yes. About fifteen minutes later. I saw him come home."

"Didn't you think it was strange that Rigu would come home directly after he had committed a murder? He must have known he'd been seen."

Hobarut grinned. "Rigu is not too bright."

"After he came home, did he go out again?"

"He must have, though I didn't see him. When I finished my lunch I went back in my mine. But I hear he was seen later, in the village. If Rigu doesn't return—think about it, why would he?—Hafnar Juradnu will be able to enjoy *daji-baji* with Rigu's wife any time he likes, instead of only on the sly."

Zhaga felt a stab of jealousy. "Hafnar Juradnu?"

"The bartender at the inn. He has a room there. For the past month Hafnar has been visiting Rigu's wife. Rigu doesn't know. From what Rigu has let slip to me, I gather that he and his wife don't see eye to eye horizontally, if you know what I mean. I take

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it that Rigu's wife expects more from Rigu than he knows how to do. Or wants to do. I suspect that Hafnar knows how to do it and is more than glad to do it. I've seen Hafnar arrive at Rigu's cave in his decrepit old Yugo hardly ten minutes after Rigu has left in his truck. It's obvious that Hafnar waits somewhere up the road for Rigu's wife to call him and give him the all clear."

Zhaga asked, "Hasn't anyone told Rigu about Hafnar?"

"No one wants to be the one to tell Rigu he's a *kukudu*. Besides, we all feel sorry for Rigu's wife. Let her have her fun. There's not a single miner who would betray her to Rigu."

"Hasn't Rigu ever come home unexpectedly and caught Hafnar there?"

"No. Rigu is always absent in the afternoon for at least three hours. Hafnar stays for only an hour and is long gone before Rigu comes home. I happen to know that today Hafnar won't be visiting Rigu's wife at all. Hafnar is injured. I was at the bar last night and saw it happen. He threw his back out lifting a liquor cabinet."

Good, Zhaga thought. He asked, "Is it Rigu's regular routine to leave for several hours every afternoon?"

"It is. He works in his mine each morning, then around one o'clock he gets in his truck and heads north across the barrens. Everyone assumes he goes to a secret location where he finds his artifacts. At different times miners have tried to follow him, to get in on the find, you know, but he's so skillful at weaving in and out among the knolls that anyone pursuing him soon loses sight of him."

"Speaking of mining," Zhaga said shyly, "this morning I found this lump of crystals behind the inn. Is it adnanite? Have I made a strike?" Zhaga placed the lump on the table.

Hobarut glanced at the lump. "It's beganite. Worth nothing. See the yellow soil adhering to it? Adnanite comes from blue soil."

"Oh," Zhaga said, his mining career over before it had begun.

A thought related to his present profession struck him. "A criminal wishing to pass this sample off as adnanite would wash away the yellow soil and smear it with blue soil, would he not?"

"It's been tried. The crystalline structure is different."

"Oh."

Zhaga had invited the two witnesses to have breakfast at the inn as his guests, stipulating that they sit at different tables. Both had accepted with alacrity and had ordered substantial miners' breakfasts. Zhaga had not felt like eating.

He now got up from Hobarut's table and moved across the dining room to where Yasfid was demolishing a sausage *hibaliki*. He asked Yasfid, "Why do you think Rigu went up on bluff Number

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Five yesterday?" Zhaga was careful to enunciate clearly, as Yasfid was hard of hearing.

"He was furious at Thokoreh." Yasfid spoke deliberately, seeming to be aware that his speech was difficult to understand. "Anyone else but Rigu would have simply ignored the little troll. But Rigu was vain. Thokoreh's opinion of him mattered. He wanted Thokoreh to know that his hair color was one hundred percent natural. That he did not bleach his hair—I have to say that Rigu's concern over his hair color puzzled me. Rigu claimed that he had as much right as Thokoreh to dig for artifacts and sell them, and that he had his own private dig. He said it was a collapsed and buried Wythian shrine. He boasted that he was selling fine goods at far higher prices than Thokoreh could ever wheedle out of his buyers for his crude earthenware pots."

"Where did you obtain all this information?"

"Directly from their conversation. I can read lips. I saw what they were saying. Thokoreh demanded to know where the Wythian shrine was. He claimed that all artifacts in the western barrens belonged to the Ochirs. Rigu laughed at him."

"Were blows exchanged?"

"Thokoreh swung his club and missed. He hopped around, swinging and missing. Rigu kept on dodging and laughing. Thokoreh began taunting Rigu. He bragged that he had been enjoying fancy *daji-baji* with Rigu's wife every day while Rigu was gone. Rigu stopped laughing. He swung with his rock hammer and bashed in Thokoreh's skull. It was ironic. Rigu's wife would never have let that repulsive little goblin near her. It was Hafnar Juradnu who was enjoying *daji-baji* with Rigu's wife, and Rigu didn't know."

"Did you report what you saw?"

"I tried, but the constable wasn't answering his phone. He didn't answer until around three o'clock. Meanwhile, I watched the Ochirs discover Thokoreh's body. They took it away, to the mortuary mount, I suppose. The Ochirs didn't learn for several hours who had killed Thokoreh. They had to find out from the constable, after the constable had heard it from Hobarut and me. You'll never catch Rigu, you know. By now he must be in Lower Tavik."

"When the constable didn't answer his phone, why didn't you call the district police authority in Mahkopol?"

Yasfid blinked, as though Zhaga had asked him why he hadn't called Saturn.

Zhaga asked, "How do you know it was Rigu on the bluff?"

"Nobody but Rigu would have said anything about a Wythian shrine. You might as well ask me how I knew it was Thokoreh."

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The iron band around Zhaga's head tightened. He had yet to confirm that a homicide had taken place.

At ten A.M. the constable drove Zhaga in his van to the mortuary mount beyond the bluffs. Present-day Tavikis, unlike their Kabu ancestors, abhorred ground burial. Modern Tavikis held that the only proper way to release the souls of the dead was to expose their corporeal remains to the vultures.

The two men climbed the mount. While the constable groaned and retched, Zhaga examined what was left of Thokoreh's ragged corpse after it had been torn by hooked beaks and gnawed on by small creatures. Zhaga noted the bashed-in skull, the gap between the upper incisors that Hobarut had told him to look for, the bowed, rickety legs, and the badly set right ulna. It was Thokoreh, all right.

There was no need to call Mahkopol for a coroner's van. The corpse had already been consecrated. Zhaga's affidavit and that of the constable would suffice.

The constable then drove Zhaga back to the village. Zhaga got into his own car and drove to the bluffs, where he canvassed the neighborhood, looking for anyone who might have seen something significant the day before.

One miner recalled, "It was about quarter to one yesterday when I came out of my tunnel to grab a smoke and saw Rigu's wife leaving her cave. She looked upset. She got into her car and drove away in a hurry."

Another miner recalled, "Yesterday when I stepped out of my tunnel to take a leak, I saw Rigu's wife driving up to her cave in her Peugeot. It was about a quarter to two. Rigu's truck was still there, which was odd. Usually he's gone by one. I thought, *hoah*, Hafnar had better not try coming around today! Rigu's wife got out of her car, and then she did something very peculiar. She ran several yards back up the road, waving her arms and dancing, as though she was signaling to Hafnar not to come. But I couldn't see Hafnar's Yugo. It never came in sight. She danced around for at least a minute, waving her arms like a crazy woman. Then she suddenly stopped. She came back down the road and went into her cave as normal as ever."

Twenty-four hours had now passed since the homicide. Zhaga got in his car again and found his way to the ancient Kabu cemetery where the Ochirs were digging. As he got out of his car he held his badge conspicuously in front of him so that the scowling Ochirs could see that he was not a government agent, but a mere policeman.

He approached a man standing by a pile of earthenware pots. The man's ankle-length *yaro* was frayed. His boots were broken.

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Still, he made a better appearance than the unkempt and filthy diggers. Zhaga took him to be the foreman.

Zhaga said, "I hear you are looking for Rigu Wazhi. You want his head."

The foreman regarded Zhaga with grim melancholy. "It may be true that our young men yearn to restore the former fierce pride of the Ochirs, but as for *looking* for Rigu, how should we do that?" The foreman turned his sad gaze toward an old truck. An Ochir lay under the truck, banging with a hammer at its frame. "This is our only vehicle. We need it for transporting pots. If someone were to bring us Rigu Wazhi's head, we would be glad to have it. But we shall not be looking for Rigu."

For the next two hours Zhaga sought out and interviewed the six people who had witnessed Rigu's threatening behavior toward Amiri in the village at three thirty the day before. They all remembered seeing Rigu bring his truck to a rocking halt in front of Amiri and get out of the cab, his face contorted with rage. After shaking his fist at Amiri, he had jumped back into his truck and sped off.

Upon completing the interviews, Zhaga made several phone calls, one of which enlightened him considerably about Amiri.

Hardly had he finished making the last call when he received one. It was the constable. He was at One Rock. The constable had found Rigu's truck with the key still in the ignition, and no sign of Rigu.

Zhaga obtained directions to One Rock from the innkeeper, plus the information that One Rock was not a village but an ancient Kabu megalith of little archaeological interest, visited no oftener than twice a year by schoolchildren on field trips. One Rock had recently become a cell tower. Cell towers abounded in the barrens, owing to a gigantic government boondoggle that seemed to have embarrassed no one.

When Zhaga arrived at One Rock, the constable had already searched Rigu's truck and had found nothing amiss, only a great number of CDs in the front seat, all of them albums by a mediocre Taviki rock band calling themselves Ighi and the Derelicts. Ighi was depicted on several of the covers wearing what seemed to be his signature costume—Ugar pantaloons, a brocade coat, a planter's hat, and scarlet boots. The stony ground surrounding the truck offered no clue as to why Rigu had abandoned his vehicle.

Zhaga got behind the wheel and tested the engine. Nothing appeared to be amiss. He drove the truck into the village, the constable following in his van. Zhaga impounded the truck in the rear courtyard of the inn. The constable then drove Zhaga back to One

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Rock, where Zhaga got into his own car again and once more drove back to the village.

It was six P.M, time for the bar at the inn to open. Zhaga found Hafnar Juradnu behind the bar, wearing a body brace.

Zhaga identified himself. He said insincerely, "I'm sorry to hear that you suffered an injury last night."

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

Hafnar was an open-faced youth with smooth brown skin and wavy black hair. Zhaga hated him.

"At first I felt only a little popping sensation in my spine," Hafnar recalled. "I thought it was nothing. But by the end of my shift I could hardly move. Still, I thought I would be better by today. I wasn't. Today the practitioner had to put me in this thing."

"Can you still tend bar?"

"Well enough. I just can't lift anything."

It pleased Zhaga to know that Hafnar would not be lifting himself over Amiri for some time to come.

Zhaga said, "I understand you've been having relations with Rigu Wazhki's wife."

"Yes!" Hafnar's eyes shone with joy. "Amiri is a lovely lady. I would do anything for her. Anything. I mean it. Why she stayed with Rigu puzzled me. He could never make her happy. He was a brute. He didn't care about a woman's needs. But that's all in the past. Amiri is free now to follow her heart."

"Do you know Rigu Wazhi?"

"Do you mean, *did* I know him? Because he's not coming back, you know. He must have reached Lower Tavik by now. Yes, I knew him. He came in here wearing those ridiculous clothes almost every night. He always brought Amiri. That's how I met her. He treated her like *cuhaka*. She put up with it. I don't know why. I felt like saying something, but I'm not a fighter, and Rigu was bigger than me. No taller, but forty pounds heavier. Then this past Sunday night I saw her change suddenly. She talked back to him! She'd had a few drinks along with him, so she was feeling brave. She told him to watch how he spoke to her or she might decide to do without him. Something besides just the alcohol had given her courage."

"Did you visit Rigu's wife yesterday afternoon?"

"No. I waited for her all-clear call, but it never came."

"Did you visit her today?"

"I couldn't." Hafnar fussed with the straps on his body brace. "This thing is driving me *befousha*." He reached behind him to the back bar and took a pink-wrapped lozenge from a bowl of lozenges. He unwrapped the pink cellophane and popped the lozenge

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into his mouth. "Calms the nerves," he said. "I go through a bowl of these every night. I have really bad nerves."

Zhaga went to see Amiri again. Declining a mug of tea, he descended to his sagging floor cushion and leaned back against the lumpy bedroll. Amiri sat opposite him. Incense hung heavily in the air.

"Rehira, on Sunday night you were heard speaking strong words to your husband. Could that occasion have had a bearing on his disappearance?"

"Absolutely not. All married couples have disagreements."

"Young Hafnar Juradnu believes he has a future with you."

"Poor boy. He is deluded. He is only a friend. It is Rigu who has my heart." Amiri's dark lavender eyes dared Zhaga not to believe her.

"Your friend Hafnar will not be visiting you again any time soon. His injury is serious."

"You are mistaken. When he called me last night he assured me that he would be recovered by today."

"He was mistaken. He has not recovered. He did not visit you this afternoon, did he? He is disabled."

Concern appeared on Amiri's face. Again Zhaga felt a stab of jealousy.

"Rehira, you told me last evening that you left here at three P.M. yesterday afternoon to drive into the village."

"Yes?"

"You neglected to tell me about your earlier outing. You left here at quarter to one and returned at quarter to two. Where were you for an hour?"

Amiri gazed steadily at Zhaga. "Driving around. I do that sometimes."

"What if your husband had awakened to find you gone?"

"I thought that unlikely, since I had tried to rouse him and couldn't."

"I hear you were dancing in the road."

"Who told you that?"

"Were you dancing in the road, Rehira?"

"I was performing a stress-reducing exercise called 'Whirling Leaves.'"

"The middle of a public road seems an inappropriate place for such an exercise. I suggest you may have been attempting to attract notice."

"That's absurd. Why would I want to do that?"

"To have your actions seen and remembered," Zhaga said. "Or else to direct attention away from someone else's actions."

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Amiri drew herself up. "From whose actions, pray?"

Zhaga was silent. Then he said, "Your husband has been leaving here every afternoon in his truck. Has he been visiting his Wythian shrine?"

"What Wythian shrine?"

"I know about the shrine, Rehira. Where is it?"

"I have no idea. Rigu has never told me. May I ask how you happened to learn about the shrine?"

"No . . . Since you know about the shrine, you must be aware that your husband has been illegally excavating artifacts and selling them."

Amiri's voice took on a defiant ring. "Historical artifacts *should* be excavated and sold to persons who will value them and care for them, rather than be left underground to disintegrate. The laws regarding the excavating and sale of artifacts are irrational."

"Rehira, why did you abruptly leave your job at the Ofran Fine Arts Gallery in Tavikopol two months ago?"

Zhaga had expected to catch Amiri by surprise. But she gazed at him affectlessly. Lela would have turned color and stammered. *Oh Lela.*

"I was unhappy as Nilo Ofran's assistant," Amiri said. "I was ill paid and underappreciated. One day a rough young miner came into the gallery when I was the only staff person in attendance. He pulled a dirt-caked ceramic figurine from an ore sack and asked for an appraisal. I recognized the figurine as a thirteenth century Wythian shrine idol. This time I did not alert Nilo. The last time I had alerted Nilo to an opportunity, he had cut me out of the subsequent transaction. I knew that if there were more Wythian objects where this one had come from, money could be made, and I deserved to have it more than Nilo."

"The young miner was Rigu Wazhi, was he not?"

"Yes. I told him that he had undoubtedly found a buried Wythian shrine. I asked him where it was. He wouldn't tell me. But from the yellow soil adhering to the figurine, I knew it had come from somewhere in the western barrens. I had the figurine cleaned by a restorer who is reliably incurious about provenance. I sold the figurine for an excellent price to an avid but discreet collector."

Zhaga smiled. "Did you let Rigu have some of the money?"

"Rigu was thrilled with the amount of money he received. He was so thrilled he brought me a second piece—an offertory bowl. I sold it for an even better price than I had got for the figurine. Rigu bought fancy clothes with the money he received for the bowl and then proposed to me."

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"So you quit your job, married Rigu, and came to live with him here."

"Yes."

"With the intention of getting him to reveal to you the location of his shrine."

Amiri was silent.

"Or else because you were helplessly in love with him."

Amiri smiled at the idea.

She said, "Thus far I have been unsuccessful in persuading Rigu to tell me the location of the shrine. I cannot even get him to move out of this cave into a house in the village. And though he drives off every day for three hours and brings back more pieces, he insists on selling the pieces himself to Thokoreh's buyers, for a mere fraction of what I could sell them for in Tavikopol."

"Which is understandable," Zhaga said, "since he is ignorant of the huge commissions you took on the first two pieces. He thinks he is getting a better price from Thokoreh's buyers."

Amiri changed the subject. "Inspector, please find the impostor so my husband can come home."

"Rehira, your theory about an impostor is not credible. You have hoped that your husband could be restored to you so that you might eventually extract from him the location of the shrine. You have hoped to intrude on his operation and take it over for yourself. But that is not going to happen. If your husband is found, he will be arrested. In any case, he is not coming home. Your career as an artifacts dealer has reached an impasse."

Amiri's wisp of a smile seemed to acknowledge this to be true. "Will you now be reporting me to the National Heritage Agency?"

"I must. You have admitted to me that you have illegally sold national heritage treasures to private individuals."

Zhaga rose from his floor cushion. Amiri rose with him. As she did, the cushion she had been sitting on disgorged a small object from its velvet side pocket. The object fell five inches to the dirt floor.

It was a soil-caked ceramic foot, four inches long. The foot's ankle and instep were peach colored and glossy. Its shoe was a somber matte indigo.

Amiri picked up the foot. "Rigu brought this fragment home last Sunday. He hoped to eventually find the figurine it belonged to." She sighed lightly and slipped the foot back into its velvet pocket.

Amiri was exhibiting remarkable poise, considering that her ambitions had just been thwarted. How different she was from flighty Lela.

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Zhaga discovered that he did not want to leave. "Rehira, may I trouble you for a mug of tea?"

If Amiri was surprised, she did not show it. She set about heating water.

Zhaga descended to his cushion again. He said into the air, "I need not make my report to the National Heritage Agency immediately. I can wait until after I have made my homicide report to the district police authority. Then at that time, if the agency cannot conveniently find you, they will probably pursue the matter no further."

Amiri handed Zhaga his mug of tea. This time he drank the tea. At eight o'clock he rose, set down his mug, and looked long at Amiri. He bade her a casual good night, as though he expected to see her the next day. But he knew that by morning she would be gone. He would have to report to the district police authority that a person of interest in his case had vanished.

Arriving back at the inn, Zhaga briefly considered having dinner. The dining room was still open. But he had no appetite. He went directly to his room.

At midnight Amiri called Zhaga. "The Ochirs have carried out their threat," she said. She had awakened to the sound of a great thud coming from the back room of the cave. Going to investigate, she had found Rigu slumped on the floor next to the chemical toilet. He had been dropped down the vent shaft. He was missing his clothes. And his head.

Zhaga and the constable arrived at the cave about thirty minutes later. By now it was Wednesday. Rigu smelled very ripe. He had two stab wounds in his chest. Zhaga thought Rigu had likely been dead for thirty-six hours. From the look of his neck, his head had been removed post mortem, perhaps within the past three hours.

Zhaga asked, "Rehira, will you be consecrating the body?"

Amiri shuddered. "No."

Zhaga called the district police authority in Mahkopol and requested a coroner's van.

Amiri was trembling. She seemed faint and exhausted.

Zhaga looked around. The cave was tidier than he remembered. "Rehira, have you been cleaning?"

"Yes. While I was waiting for you to arrive. It was something to do. It was better than just sitting here, haunted by that—thing in the next room."

Amiri had swept the earthen floor, plumped up the sagging floor cushions, rerolled the lumpy bedroll, and scrubbed the kitchen table.

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"Constable, everything that belonged to Rigu now belongs to me. I intend to work the mine. I will be perfectly safe remaining here. The Ochirs will no longer be interested in me now that they have Rigu's head." Although tired, she was making no pretense at being grief stricken. "When will you be taking your padlock off the mine door?"

The constable had cut Rigu's padlock off the mine door late Monday afternoon and replaced it with his own padlock, so that if Rigu returned, he could not hide in his mine. The astonished constable now replied, "Rehira, mining is heavy work, even for a man."

"Furthermore, Rehira," Zhaga said, "if you remain, the National Heritage Agency—"

"Will do nothing," Amiri said. "The agency is benignly corrupt. Hope will continue to smolder in the heart of one well-placed official there that I will again invite him to share in the proceeds of my sales. Perhaps one day—" Amiri gestured northward. "—I will learn the location of Rigu's shrine. But until I do, I must sustain myself any way I can. As Rigu's widow I am entitled to sell whatever adnanite I can extract from this mine. Constable, when can I expect you to remove your padlock?"

"Tomorrow morning," Zhaga promised.

The time was one fifteen A.M. The coroner's van would not be arriving until much later in the morning. Leaving the constable to watch over Rigu's corpse, Zhaga drove back into the village, followed by Amiri in her Peugeot. At the inn Zhaga gallantly paid for a room for Amiri. Wishing her a restful night, he went to his own room.

Sleep eluded him. At six A.M. he was still awake.

On the nightstand by the bed lay the ceramic foot Zhaga had abstracted from the side pocket of Amiri's floor cushion while Amiri had been occupied heating water. He picked up the foot and turned it around and around in his hand, as though it were a talisman imbued with the power to remedy perplexedness. Zhaga's focus suddenly sharpened. A sound rose from his throat.

Foot in hand, he thought about the CDs on the front seat of Ridu's truck. And about Amiri's insistence on remaining in the cave to work the mine, now that the Ochirs had Rigu's head.

He thought about hotheaded Rigu. Why had Rigu so imprudently returned home after killing Thokoreh and then afterward so imprudently appeared in town?

He thought about the ragged, demoralized Ochirs. Why had the Ochirs waited until last night to deliver Rigu's decaying corpse?

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He thought about Hafnar's declared eagerness to do anything, anything, for Amiri.

And thought about Amiri, tidying up the cave, compulsively sweeping and scrubbing, plumping the sagging floor cushions and making a neat, slender cylinder of the bedroll. Amiri had called Zhaga at midnight. He had arrived at twelve thirty. Zhaga knew little about housework as he'd never seen Lela do any, but it seemed to him that all the tidying Amiri had done would have taken her longer than half an hour.

Zhaga set down the foot. He reached for his yellow legal pad and began sketching hasty, rough grids. On the grids he plotted tentative coordinates representing time, place, and individuals. He scribbled a half dozen terse, five-word scenarios that soon sprouted diagonal queries such as "last seen alive?" "enough time?" and "who benefits?"

One by one he crossed out all the scenarios but one. He stood up and got dressed.

Forty minutes later Zhaga arrived at the Kabu cemetery. The sun was up. A breeze was stirring. The iron band that had been around Zhaga's head was gone.

The diggers were at work. The Ochir foreman was wearing Ugar pantaloons. He appeared to have been expecting Zhaga.

Zhaga said to him, "I believe you received a gift last night."

"We did. We found it here when we arrived at dawn. Now that we have it, our young men are satisfied and no longer need it. Have you come for it?"

"Yes."

"One moment." The foreman stepped away.

Zhaga noted that a nearby digger was pushing his spade into the earth with a scarlet boot. Another digger was wearing a brocade coat.

Nearby on the ground a scrap of pink cellophane stirred spasmodically in the morning breeze. Zhaga picked up the scrap and held it inquiringly toward the digger in the brocade coat. The digger reached into his pocket, pulled out a pink-wrapped lozenge, and offered it to Zhaga.

The foreman returned. He was carrying a plastic grocery sack. Lettering on the sack read, "Hulya's Fine Groceries." Zhaga took the sack from him and looked inside at the human head.

The head was in poor condition. But Zhaga could see that it had belonged to a young, brown-skinned man. The head had undergone a hasty haircut. One-inch tufts of not quite blond hair stood out in all directions from the scalp.

"Who has the hat?" Zhaga asked.

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"There was no hat," the foreman said.

Zhaga drove to the bluffs. The constable was removing his padlock from the mine door. The coroner's deputy and the crime scene deputy were loading Rigu's body into their van. "Don't worry, we were going to wait for you," the coroner's deputy guiltily assured Zhaga.

"You'll need this." Zhaga handed the deputy the head in its grocery sack. "And you'll need to take some other things with you." Zhaga took the deputy inside the cave and showed him what the other things were.

The constable came into the cave and said to Zhaga, "After I took the padlock off, I went inside and had a good look around. I found something."

Zhaga went with the constable. The two men entered the mine and remained there for half an hour, then drove to the village. Zhaga woke up Hafnar and told him what he had deduced. Hafnar burst into tears.

Zhaga then called Amiri. He apologized for waking her. He invited her to have breakfast with him in the dining room.

"Has the padlock been removed?" she asked.

"It has."

The time was ten A.M. Amiri had ordered toast and coffee. Zhaga had ordered two mutton chops, a roast pigeon, and a potato *hibaliki* topped with a poached egg. The constable was standing by, forgoing breakfast.

Zhaga attacked his mutton chops with gusto. Amiri nibbled at her toast, sipped at her coffee, then laid her napkin by her plate.

"Thank you for the breakfast," she said. "Now I must be on my way to my mine." She rose, her car keys in her hand.

Chewing and swallowing, Zhaga reached into his suit pocket. He brought forth the ceramic foot and laid it on the table. "Rehira, I suggest you remain."

Amiri looked at the foot. She sat down again.

Zhaga said, "Rigu came home with this foot on Sunday. By Sunday evening you had guessed the location of the shrine and knew that you no longer had to endure your husband's abuse. That is why you had the confidence to speak defiantly to him at the bar on Sunday night. When you told me yesterday that you did not know the location of the shrine, you were lying."

"Yes," Amiri admitted serenely. "On Sunday, while Rigu wasn't watching, I examined the shoe and began scratching idly with my fingernail at this buildup of dried dirt, right here—" Amiri tapped the foot with her coffee spoon where the instep

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met the shoe. "Under the caked yellow soil I discovered this streak of blue soil. I realized immediately that Rigu had been falsifying the source of his artifacts and that he had done so with the very first figurine he ever brought me. I decided to keep my discovery a secret from Rigu until I had decided how best to use it to my advantage."

Zhaga said, "Rigu must have chanced across the shrine three months ago when he started his new tunnel. He fooled you, Rehira. He fooled everyone by simply washing off the blue soil from each artifact he dug up and smearing it with yellow soil."

"But when he washed this foot, he didn't see that he hadn't got all the blue soil off. You can see why he failed to notice. The blue soil is virtually the same color as the shoe. I understand now why Rigu wouldn't move out of the cave—he wanted to remain close to the shrine. His afternoon excursions into the barrens were merely a ruse to mislead the other miners. His only productive time of day was the early morning, when he was digging in the shrine."

"While his unproductive afternoons were spent somewhere in the barrens, listening to Ighi and the Derelicts." Zhaga signaled to the constable, then enthusiastically addressed his roast pigeon.

From an ore sack the constable produced a ceramic Wythian deity fifteen inches tall, with a glossy, peach-colored complexion. Its pedestal allowed it to stand upright on the table even though it was missing a foot. The deity was extremely clean.

"You've found it!" Amiri exclaimed.

"It was in a tub of water inside the shrine," Zhaga said. With his front teeth he stripped pigeon flesh from a small drumstick. "Rigu had been soaking off the blue soil. The constable and I remained in the tunnel for a few more minutes, digging, hoping to confirm that it was indeed a collapsed Wythian shrine. We were lucky enough to find this . . ."

From another ore sack the constable drew a ceremonial tray. Damp blue soil clogged the piercings around its rim. He set the tray on the table, then left the dining room, seeming to have become suddenly occupied with a new errand.

Amiri gazed greedily at the tray, and at the Wythian god. "May I suppose that you are now giving over these articles to me? Since they are legally mine?"

"No," Zhaga said. "There is another matter, Rehira. Hafnar has confessed. He is presently in custody in the liquor storage room. When the evidence is examined in Mahkopol, residue of human tissue will be found on your knives. It has been my experience

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that perpetrators never wash their knives as thoroughly as they think they do. The stains and exudations on the inside of your bedroll will be found to have come from prolonged contact with a decomposing body. Rehira, can you tell me what happened?"

Amira regarded Zhaga with the eyes of a Dirig witch. " I killed my husband."

No hesitating. No futile blaming. What a woman. How different from the dissembling Lela. *Ah, Lela, Lela.*

"Early Monday morning," Amiri said, "Hobarut the jokester came by the cave to torment Rigu. He told Rigu that Thokoreh was accusing him of bleaching his hair. Rigu was insulted. He left for his mine as usual—I should say shrine now, shouldn't I?—but by eleven forty-five he had come back and was stomping around the cave, yelling that he was going to have it out with Thokoreh, right now—or as soon as he'd changed into his new clothes. He wanted Thokoreh to see his new clothes and be envious of how prosperous he was. He knew Thokoreh carried a club, so he took a rock hammer with him when he left. He came back at twelve fifteen. He was purple in the face and breathing hard. He told me he had just killed Thokoreh. He grabbed me and threw me against the wall."

"And accused you of having *daji-baji* with Thokoreh."

"How did you know?"

"Because he didn't flee after killing Thokoreh. He risked being apprehended to return to his cave. He felt compelled to confront and punish you. Enraged cuckolds do that. I have arrested several. Continue, Rehira."

"I denied what he said and kept on denying it. I tried edging toward the door, but he backed me against the table. Then he started undressing. I thought that was strange, since there could be no doubt that he had been seen killing Thokoreh. It seemed to me that he wouldn't want to take the time to change clothes, but instead would want to disappear as quickly as possible. But then he ordered me to undress, and I realized what he intended. I obeyed as slowly as I dared. When he'd got his clothes off and was naked, he kicked open the bedroll and shouted that he was going to treat me to the kind of *daji-baji* that a dirty *yugha* like me deserved and then he was going to kill me. He lunged at me. I grabbed a twelve-inch knife from the table from behind me and stabbed him in the chest. He staggered. I stabbed him again. He fell onto the bedroll. He bled a little, then stopped. I knew he was dead."

Zhaga plunged a fork into his potato *hibaliki*. "That was the moment when you should have called the constable."

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"I thought if I did I might be accused of killing Rigu in cold blood so I could be with Hafnar. I thought if Rigu were simply to disappear, everything would be much simpler. So I rolled Rigu up in the bedroll."

"And then called Hafnar. But not to dispose of the body. "

"No. We couldn't have gotten rid of Rigu in broad daylight. I needed Hafnar to help me establish that Rigu was still alive. I told Hafnar to meet me at One Rock. I was confident that nobody would see the two of us together at One Rock. No one ever goes there. It was important that we not be seen together. Hafnar was nervous on the phone. He kept asking me what the matter was, what was wrong. I though it best not to tell him just yet. I left the cave at quarter to one."

"Quarter to one," Zhaga affirmed. "You were seen getting into your car."

"When I reached One Rock, Hafnar was already there. I explained to him what had happened and what the two of us had to do about it. He nearly fainted. He had filled both his pockets with over-the-counter tranquilizer lozenges. He began popping the lozenges. I hid him in the hatchback of my Peugeot like a sack of onions and drove him back to the cave."

"Where you were seen arriving at quarter to two," Zhaga said. "You got out of your car and ran up the road. You made quite a spectacle of yourself, Rehira, dancing wildly in the road."

"I did my utmost to make a spectacle of myself. I couldn't let anyone see Hafnar. While I was dancing, Hafnar slipped out of the hatchback and into the cave."

"Where you dressed him in Rigu's new clothes."

"Yes. The boots fit. The pantaloons fit. But Hafnar had to wear his own coat under the brocade coat to look as big as Rigu. Before he put on the brocade coat, he loaded its pockets with lozenges. He was horribly nervous."

"What about Rigu's hair?"

"I unrolled Rigu. I cut off his hair and rolled him back up again. I sewed the hanks of hair around the inside of his planter's hat. I pinned up Hafnar's hair and jammed Rigu's hat on his head. I gave Hafnar his own bundled-up clothes and the keys to Rigu's truck. I made Hafnar repeat to me what he had to do. Then I left in my Peugeot."

"At three P.M."

"Yes. Hafnar waited five minutes, then he came out of the cave as Rigu and got in Rigu's truck. He drove into the village and did what I'd told him to do, then drove to One Rock and changed back into his own clothes. I drove to One Rock after him and

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made him hand over Rigu's clothes to me. I would need them later, and I didn't trust Hafnar to keep them for me. He was very distraught. He got in his Yugo and drove back to the inn. I drove back to the cave."

Zhaga began to feel grudging compassion for Hafnar. "What about Rigu's body?"

"I had made Hafnar promise to help me get rid of the body later. I'd told him to come to the cave after his shift at the bar. All the miners would be gone from the bluffs by then. They'd be in their homes in the village. Nobody would see. Together we would put Rigu in the truck, drive him to the Kabu cemetery, and dump him. And his clothes. The Ochirs would be delighted to have Rigu. And they could use the clothes."

"But then Hafnar hurt his back that night at work."

"Yes." Amiri gave a hiss of annoyance. "He called me to tell me that he wouldn't be able to help me until the following night. That night I was forced to sleep on the floor cushions."

"I understand," Zhaga said. "Your dead husband was occupying the bedroll. Then yesterday evening, when you learned that Hafnar's back was unimproved, you realized that Hafnar wasn't going to be helping you with Rigu at all."

"Rigu had been dead since midday Monday. I knew he wouldn't keep another night. By morning, the strongest incense in the world could not have concealed his presence in the cave. I saw I would have to deal with Rigu by myself."

Zhaga said, "I left you at eight o'clock last evening. You must have sprung into action immediately."

"I had to. I unrolled Rigu. I cut off his head and put it in a plastic grocery sack, along with his new clothes. I decided it would be wise to destroy the hat. I didn't want anyone ever to see that hat again, with its give-away fringe of long, pale hair. I cut up the hat into tiny pieces, and also the hanks of hair, and put the pieces in another plastic sack."

"Then you took a drive."

"To the Kabu cemetery. It was deserted. There was a stiff breeze. I scattered the cuttings of hair and straw to the wind, and the plastic sack as well. I pitched the other sack into a half-excavated grave. Then I drove back to the cave."

"To face the most difficult part."

"I took off my clothes and bound up my hair. I grabbed hold of the bedroll and tugged it, inch by inch, with Rigu on it, toward the back room. When I got the bedroll to the doorway, I wrestled Rigu into the back room and onto the toilet. I found it was true about dead bodies weighing more. Of all the times Rigu had been on top

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of me, he had never been that heavy. Or that smelly. "

"We didn't find him on the toilet."

"I couldn't get him to stay on the toilet. He wouldn't drape correctly. He was still in rigor. He fell stiffly to one side. I did the best I could. Next, I cleaned house. I swept the floor first. Dragging Rigu, I had scuffed up a lot of dirt. Then I rerolled the bedroll and brushed the dirt off it. I scrubbed the table where I had set Rigu's leaky head. I washed the knives I had used to cut off his head with. I punched up the floor cushions to match the tidy bedroll. And still I wasn't finished. I heated water and washed myself. It took me a long time and two tubs of water to wash off the cadaver foulness. Then I got dressed and unbound my hair. I was so tired I was shaking. I could hardly get my fingers to punch out the numbers on my cell phone. I called you and told you that the Ochirs had just delivered Rigu. It was midnight."

The constable had returned. He announced to Zhaga, "The vehicle has arrived."

Zhaga had called the district police authority at nine A.M., requesting that a vehicle be sent to transport two suspects to Mahkopol.

Two uniformed officers entered the dining room. On seeing the officers, Zhaga and Amiri rose together.

Zhaga said, "Rehira, I am placing you under arrest on suspicion of homicide."

"I understand," Amiri murmured.

"You will plead self-defense, of course."

Zhaga saw the uniformed officers look at each other in astonishment. The inspector was offering counsel to his suspect.

"You feared for your life," Zhaga said. "Your husband was known to be violent and abusive. He had just killed a man before he attacked you. The judges will doubtless acquit you of the charge despite your having attempted to conceal your husband's death. They will not be so lenient with Hafnar. He will probably serve a term in prison."

"Yes," Amiri agreed, seeming in far better spirits than Zhaga. "I expect I shall be acquitted. And when I am, the rights to Rigu's shrine will go to me, and I can lawfully invite the public to visit the shrine for a fee. Although I myself will be prohibited from digging, I can invite sanctioned National Heritage scholars to dig. When the digs are completed, I can lawfully sell all the found artifacts, albeit to institutions only. I won't be able to charge the high prices I used to, but—" Amiri shrugged and smiled.

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"What about Hafnar, Rehira? He performed an elaborate masquerade for your sake. What happens to him now? Will you visit him in prison? Will you welcome him when he is released?"

Amiri's eyes became a darker lavender. "Poor boy. He has no future with me."

"Rehira, you encouraged him to believe that he does."

"He was foolish beyond belief. He should have known better."

It was what perfidious, mocking Lela had said when shattering Zhaga's heart. *"You should have known better, Tal."*

Zhaga felt an icy trickle in his gut.

One of the uniformed officers spoke to Zhaga. "Inspector, the male prisoner is already in the transport vehicle. May we escort the Rehira to the vehicle now? Are you finished with her?"

"Yes," Zhaga said. "Take her away."

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

I fully realize that I have murdered a good man because of his money, sir, and that I shall have to pay for that crime with my life.
—Robert van Gulik

From "The Morning of the Monkey" (1843) by Robert van Gulik

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IF I QUENCH THEE . . .

Arthur Stern looked past his denim-clad daughter at the apartment she had taken in one of Manhattan's ghettos. It was the first time he had seen it and he frowned critically. A rickety wicker settee served as a couch. The top of an ancient and probably unworkable combination TV-radio cabinet was used as a bar, and held two bottles of cheap rye. The lifelike poster of Communist rebel Che Guevara that decorated the otherwise plain wall behind the bar deepened the hue of Stern's pink complexion. Closing the door behind him, he handed her his coat and said, "For God's sake, Monica, put on a bra. There's not much to that blouse you're wearing."

Monica stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "Don't be so old-fashioned. If God wanted these things bound, I would have been born with a Playtex living—"

"Damn it! That isn't funny!"

"O.K.! O.K.!" Raising her hands like a holdup victim, Monica retreated backward through beaded curtains to her bedroom. She shouted from inside, "Hey, I'm glad you came to visit, Dad."

"Thought I'd surprise you since you never visit me."

"I was going to get in touch with you—"

"I'll bet."

"I was. I've got a surprise of my own."

"Nothing you might say or do would surprise me anymore."

Monica returned, mixed two highballs, and sat on the settee next to Stern. They clinked glasses. He said, "Happy birthday."

"Whoa. I'm not twenty-four until next week. Don't rush it."

"I didn't know what to give you as a present, Monica, so I thought I'd find out what you needed and write a check."

"Well, I don't really *need* anything—"

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"Seems to me you could use everything."

"Like what? I have my home, my job—"

"Some home."

"The location's convenient for work."

"Toiling for peanuts among a bunch of savages—"

"Daddy—please! I do social work because I have a conscience."

"What kind of conscience prods a daughter to leave her own flesh and blood for a band of slum dwellers?"

"You don't need me. These people do."

"Need you? Do you think your mother—God rest her soul—and I slaved to build that mink farm upstate just for ourselves?"

When Monica failed to answer, Stern continued, "We did it to get *you* away from the city—the slums—and the kind of people who dwell in them."

"These *kind* of people are good people, Dad. All they need is some help—"

"Bull! All they need is to get off their butts and help themselves like I did."

Monica gulped her drink, took a deep breath, and said, "You've always been strong, Dad. That's why you can't understand people who are weak."

The shrill buzz of the doorbell interrupted them, and Monica looked a little uncomfortable. Stern said, "Expecting company?"

"No. Not really." She fumbled with the buttons on her blouse. "It—well—it might be Tod Humbert."

"Another social worker?"

"Much more than that."

A second, more insistent buzz made Stern wince.

"Buzz him back, will you?"

The sound of a man coming up the stairs was followed by a vigorous tapping on the door. Monica opened it and said, "Oh—hi, Tod—"

A tall, thin black man wearing a short leather jacket and blue jeans wrapped his arms around her waist, kissed her on both cheeks, and said, "You're looking bad, baby. Superbad!"

Monica gently withdrew from his embrace and turned sheepishly toward her father.

"Tod—I—I want you to meet Arthur Stern, my father."

A bright smile flashed across the black man's face. He walked forward, hand extended, and said, "Mr. Stern, this is a pleasure, sir."

Ignoring Tod completely, Stern rose. "Monica, my coat please."

The girl looked pleadingly at him, then went wordlessly into the bedroom. Tod sat down on the settee and stared silently at his outstretched legs and crossed ankles. Stern wrote out a check and

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handed it to Monica when she returned with his coat.

"Fill in whatever you need."

"May I borrow your pen?"

"Of course. Here."

Monica blinked steadily as she filled out the check and handed it back to him. The amount read: *Nothing!*

The odor of rancid food that pervaded the hall disappeared as Stern stepped into the cold night air. He crumpled the rejected check in his fist, threw it into the gutter, and ordered himself to be calm. However, his stomach churned and his temples throbbed as he envisioned the black man with his daughter, the black man's arms around Monica . . .

Stern strode around the block, trying to decide what to do. He could disown Monica and wash his hands of all responsibility toward her. But the very thought made him shudder. He could go home and hope time would heal the wounds. But what if that failed? Finally, he decided he could return to her apartment, make apologies and an effort to tolerate Humbert, and start rebuilding their damaged relationship.

Choice number three was most logical, of course, so Stern swallowed his pride and marched back to his daughter's building. An elderly man who was leaving held the inner door open as Stern entered, making it unnecessary for him to ring the bell. A shaft of yellow light slanting from the recessed hall at the top of the stairs indicated a partially opened apartment door. The sound of familiar voices made him hesitate at the foot of the landing. He heard Tod Humbert say, "Don't feel bad, honey. It's good to be snubbed occasionally. Humbles the ego."

"Thanks for being so understanding, Tod."

"You're extra special. Marrying you will be the greatest thrill of my life."

A sudden upsurge of blood pressure made Stern grip the banister rail for support. He had visions of friends and business associates sporting lewd grins and knowing leers. Damn it! He could stand her seeing Humbert, but not this—not marriage, a black son-in-law.

Fists clenched, teeth grating, he left the building again and ducked into the doorway of an abandoned house diagonally across the street. The burning hatred he was feeling now conjured up remembrances a quarter-century old. His mind filled with reflections of Korea, of another people different in skin color, an alien race that had threatened him and his fellow commandoes. A threat he had eliminated with bullets, piano wire, and bare hands.

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Once again, after twenty-five years, he felt threatened. But this type of threat was different, wasn't it? New York wasn't a jungle—or was it? You couldn't react here the way you could in Korea—or could you . . . ?

If the sight of Tod Humbert emerging several minutes later from Monica's hallway stimulated Stern's adrenal glands, he showed no sign of it. He remained still until the black man disappeared around the corner, then he followed. After walking a deserted block, he called out, "Mr. Humbert!" Tod Humbert glanced warily over his shoulder. "It's me, Arthur Stern."

Stern broke into a trot to catch up, then feigned breathlessness. He said, "I hope you can forgive my rude behavior. Monica and I had angry words before you arrived and I let my emotions get the best of me. I was just returning to apologize when I happened to see you."

The black man chuckled, extended his hand and said, "We all have our faults, don't—"

He never finished his sentence. Stern gripped his outstretched hand, jerked him forward and kneed him in the groin. As Tod's legs buckled, he clawed wildly. Stern felt a burning sensation on one side of his face and heard cloth tear. Both men collapsed against a row of foul-smelling garbage cans lined up before a run-down tenement. The clatter of metal and the screech of an exasperated cat shattered the night. Stern crawled on top of Humbert, gripped his hair with both hands and pounded his head against the sidewalk. An edge-of-the-hand chop across the black man's throat ended the conflict.

Stern lumbered to his feet, glanced about, then twisted his tie and tore his shirt. The facial cut he had received before falling bled enough to satisfy him. He knew that muggings occurred with startling regularity in this section of New York City. He imagined how Monica would feel when her own father was victimized. It would be The Lesson that would teach her to despise the ghetto dwellers for the depths to which most of them sunk, and bring her home again to her own kind. Especially when he proved his attacker was Tod Humbert!

Yellow squares of light began flashing in various tenements, and somewhere nearby a window rattled open. Stern clutched his wounded face with one hand and staggered into the gutter, shouting for the police.

Arthur Stern gestured in disbelief as he spoke to the bored, flat-faced detective sitting across the desk from him. "As I told the patrolmen, I was just walking along when this man attacked me. I

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came back to the neighborhood because I wanted to talk to my daughter again. You can imagine my shock—my—my horror when the mugger turned out to be the man my daughter had introduced me to only an hour earlier. The man—my God—the man she was going to marry—"

A detective put his head through the door. "His daughter's here."

"Send her in."

Monica, complexion drained, entered listlessly. Stern went to her and gently squeezed her shoulders, saying, "Thanks for coming, baby."

She stood stiffly, not returning the embrace. Instead, she said coldly, "I thought they handcuffed murderers."

Stern felt a sudden chill on his back. He clutched her harder. "It was self-defense," he said. "Humbert tried to mug me."

"Tod could never raise his hand in violence to anyone. It would be against his principles, his way of life. If there was violence, *you* caused it. And I'll tell that to a jury. You murdered someone very dear to me."

"It isn't murder when . . . someone like that . . ." Stern looked at the flat-faced detective, who was watching him closely. Then he shook his head, hissed air in through clenched teeth and said, "Damn it! How could you even *think* of marrying him, Monica!"

"Marry him? What are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend! I came back to apologize tonight and overheard your conversation from the hall. He said marrying you would be the greatest thrill of his life."

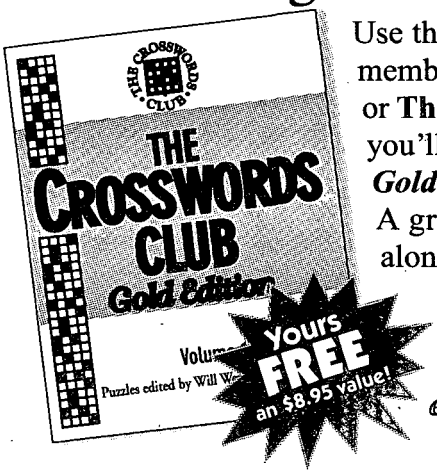
Monica stared at him for a long moment. Then she shrugged his hands from her shoulders, fumbled through her purse, and produced a snapshot of a blond man in an army medical uniform. "This is the surprise I had for you, Dad. Next month, when he gets discharged, I'm going to marry *this* man."

Stern's eyes grew wide as they rested on the picture. He tried to speak but his voice failed him. For the first time in his life, Arthur Stern knew fear as Monica's tear-stained face moved from side to side and he heard her say, "Tod was going to marry me, all right. He—he was an ordained minister . . ."

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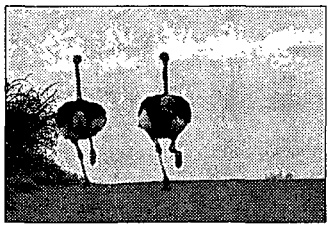
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THE STORY THAT WON



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The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Mike Donovan of Tinley Park, Illinois. Honorable mentions go to J. Patrick Alsop of Charlotte, North Carolina; Katherine Bennett of Pembroke Pines, Florida; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; Randall A. Martin of Topeka, Kansas; Kent Ostby of Marietta, Georgia; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; John Thomen of Katy, Texas; and Valerie Whisenand of Glencoe, Arkansas.

A NAGGING PROBLEM

MIKE DONOVAN

"I told you, Edgar. I told you and told you and told you, but noooo, you said it was easy pickings. You said nothing could go wrong. You said it was all rumors. Now look at us, two pigs trying to run away. Do I look good as a pig, Edgar? Huh?"

ZAP!

"Great, now we are rats. Rats, Edgar! Do you like me as a rat? Is this what you wanted?"

"Enough, Edith! It's not my fault. How was I to know? Who would believe—?"

ZAP!

"Oh, I don't know, Edgar. Let's see, who could possibly believe? We have now been turned into goats. Is it enough for you now?"

"Edith, complaining is not helping. How about offering a suggestion. Try being part of the solution for a change."

"You want a suggestion! I'll give you a suggestion! How about I never listen to my idiot of a husband ever again. How about when I tell you someone is dangerous you actually believe me. How about we never break into a supposed wizard's house again! How are those for being part of the solution! Moron!"

ZAP!

"Edgar! Help! What are we now? Ostriches! Please tell me I am not a giant ugly bird! Please explain to me again how wizards do not exist. Please tell me that you still believe ripping off Harvey Porter is a good idea!"

ZAP!

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THE LINEUP

WILLIAM E CHAMBERS is the author of *The Tormentress*, published by Hilliard & Harris in 2005.

"The Lagoon" is EVE FISHER'S twelfth story in AHMM. Her last story, "Public Immunity," appeared in the June 2007 issue of the magazine.

CATHRYN GRANT makes her debut in AHMM this month. Her work has appeared in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and as a weekly column for the *Sunnyvale Sun* in Sunnyvale, California.

Booked & Printed columnist ROBERT C. HAHN reviews mysteries for *Publishers Weekly* and *New York Post*, among other places, and is the former mystery columnist for the *Cincinnati Post*.

The stories of EDWARD D. HOCH have been published in each issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* since May 1973. Since 1961 he has published more than a hundred stories in AHMM.

ROBERT LOPRESTI is a librarian who has published dozens of short stories, including "Nailbiter" (AHMM, September 2003), which won the 2004 Derringer Award for Best Short Story.

LEIGH LUNDIN is a computer programming manager in Orlando, Florida, though he now is making a second career in writing. His first short story won the 2006 Readers' Award presented by *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

RUSSEL D. MCLEAN has published several stories to both mystery and science fiction markets. From his home in Scotland, he publishes the Web site and blog www.CrimeSceneScotland.com.

San Fransisco native JUDY ROE is the author of the novel *The Same Old Grind* (1975). "Murder in the Barrens" is her first published short story.

MARIANNE WILSKI STRONG is the author of a series of mystery stories set in ancient Greece, featuring the Sophist-sleuth Kleides. Her last story for AHMM, "Saint Casimir's Fire" (June 2007) draws from her experiences growing up in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

JAMES LINCOLN WARREN'S last story for AHMM was "When the Wind Blows" (October 2007). He publishes www.CriminalBrief.com, a blog dedicated to mystery short fiction.

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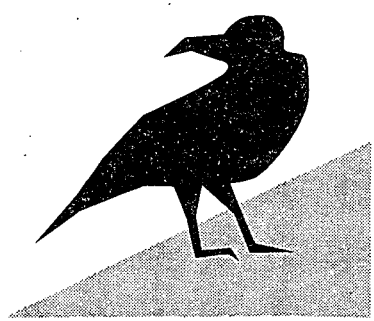
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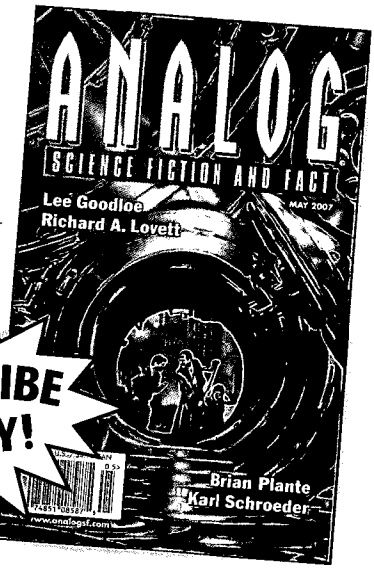
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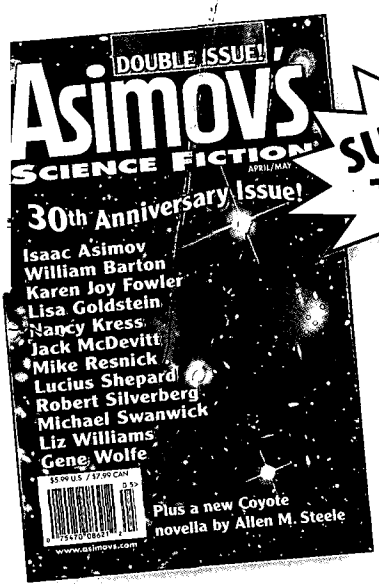
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